

# 1 Corinthians 11 Reconsidered

*Eight Counter-Readings of Paul's Argument from Nature, with the Genesis 6 Watchers Behind "Because of the Angels"*

## 1 Corinthians 11 Reconsidered: Paul's Argument from Nature

Eight Counter-Readings • The Author-and-Audience Method • ~18-Minute Lesson

By Shane Gunn • Based on Troy W. Martin, *JBL* 123/1 (2004): 75–84

**Key Texts:** 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 • Genesis 6:1–4 (LXX) • Jude 6 • 2 Peter 2:4 • Exodus 28:42–43 • Isaiah 6:2

For two thousand years, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 has been called Paul's most confused argument. Scholars label it "convoluted," "bewildering," even unsatisfactory to Paul himself. But what if the confusion is not Paul's — it is ours? When we read Paul as a first-century man speaking to first-century Greeks who shared his medical worldview, his Septuagint, and his Watcher tradition, the "convoluted" passage clicks into a single coherent argument. This study walks through the eight competing readings of the passage, then reconstructs Paul's actual line of thought using ancient Greek philology, Hippocratic physiology, and the Genesis 6 angel tradition that runs through the entire canon.

### PART ONE — THE PUZZLE OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11

γυνώ δὲ ἐὰν κομᾷ δόξα αὐτῇ ἐστίν; ὅτι ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβολαίου δέδοται [αὐτῇ].

**1 Corinthians 11:15 (Greek NT & ESV)**

"But if a woman has long hair, it is her glory; for her hair is given to her for a covering."

Open your Bible to 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Read it slowly. Then read v. 15 again and feel the contradiction. For thirteen verses Paul argues a woman should cover her head — then he seems to say her hair *is* the covering. So which is it? Should women add a cloth covering, or is the hair sufficient?

#### The scholarly verdict on Paul's argument:

- **Schüssler Fiorenza:** "a very convoluted argument, which can no longer be unraveled completely."
- **Furnish:** the argument "may well have seemed unsatisfactory even to the apostle himself."
- **Soards:** "bewilderingly difficult."

That is the puzzle. In this lesson we look at **eight** competing readings — and a ninth, deeper layer that takes Paul's first-century world far more seriously than commentaries usually do. The first seven are the standard interpretive moves. The eighth comes from Troy Martin's reconstruction of Paul's medical world. The deeper layer is the Genesis 6 Watcher tradition behind Paul's phrase "because of the angels" in v. 10.

### PART TWO — SEVEN STANDARD COUNTER-INTERPRETATIONS

When you survey the commentary tradition, you find at least seven distinct ways scholars have tried to read 1 Corinthians 11. Each one fixes one problem and creates another — and every single one collides with that one Greek phrase, ἀντὶ περιβολαίου, "instead of a covering."

#	View	Claim	Where it Breaks
1	<b>Cloth-Veil (Jewish-custom)</b>	Paul wants women to wear a fabric veil like the Roman matrona's <i>palla</i> .	v. 15 says the hair <i>is</i> the covering — so why argue for cloth?
2	<b>Hairstyle (loose vs. bound)</b>	Paul means hair worn down (signaling sexual looseness) versus properly bound up.	Requires reading "covering" as bound hair — the Greek does not say that.
3	<b>Hair-Itself-Sufficient</b>	A woman needs no extra covering because her hair already serves the function.	Nullifies Paul's entire argument in vv. 4–6.
4	<b>Cultural-Decorum-Only</b>	Local propriety only. Modern churches can drop it without loss.	Paul <i>does</i> ground it in creation, angels, and "nature."
5	<b>Headship/Subordination</b>	The covering is a theological sign of male-female ordering (vv. 3, 7–9).	Doesn't explain why "nature" itself (vv. 13–15) makes it self-evident to pagans.
6	<b>Honor-and-Shame (Jaubert)</b>	The covering signifies decency and honor, not subordination.	Explains social weight but not the v. 15 contradiction.
7	<b>Pneumatic-Women (Schüssler Fiorenza)</b>	Paul restrains women prophets praying with hair loose.	The v. 15 <i>anti peribolaïou</i> clause cuts against the very rule.

Notice the pattern. Every reading collides with that one Greek phrase. Either the "covering" in v. 15 means cloth (and contradicts the rest), or it means hair (and dissolves the rule). There has to be a third option — and the third option lives in Paul's first-century world.

## PART THREE — THE AUTHOR'S MIND: PAUL'S FIRST-CENTURY MEDICAL WORLDVIEW

To read like the *author*, we must put on first-century glasses. For Hippocratic and Aristotelian medicine — the "common sense" of Paul's world — the human body worked very differently than we now understand it.

### First-Century Reproductive Biology (Hippocrates & Aristotle)

- **Semen was produced or stored in the brain** (Hippocrates, *Genit.* 1).
- **Hair is hollow** and grows by drawing reproductive fluid into it, where it congeals (Hippocrates, *Nat. puer.* 20). The Greek κόμη was used both for human hair *and* for the suckers of a cuttlefish — anything that draws fluid in.
- **Pubic hair appears at puberty** because the channels of the body finally open and reproductive fluid begins traveling downward.
- **The male nature (φύσις) is to eject semen; the female nature is to draw it up and congeal it into a child.**
- **A woman's whole body** was thought to act like one large gland — porous, absorbent, like a flock of wool (Hippocrates, *Gland.* 16).

In this framework, a woman's long head-hair is not just decoration. It is a **functioning piece of reproductive anatomy**, working with the uterus to draw the male seed upward. Long hair on a woman is glory because it *aids her nature*. Long hair on a man is shameful because it *fight his nature* — drawing semen up to his head when his body is supposed to send it out.

That is exactly what Paul says in v. 14: long hair is a shame to a man, a glory to a woman — *by nature*. Paul is not waving his hand. He is invoking the standard biology of his day. The argument was perfectly clear to a first-century audience.

## PART FOUR — THE AUDIENCE'S MIND: HEARING ΠΕΡΙΒΟΛΑΙΟΝ

The Corinthians did not have a Strong's Concordance. They had a living Greek vocabulary. Modern lexicons translate περιβόλαιον (*peribolaion*) as "covering, wrap, cloak." But Martin shows the word had a much wider semantic range — including a **physiological** meaning.

### περιβόλαιον (*peribolaion*) — two attested meanings

- **Common sense:** a wrap or covering for the body.
- **Physiological sense:** a testicle.

Two ancient Greek witnesses make the second meaning unmistakable:

**Euripides, *Heracles* 1269:** Hercules speaks of "the *peribolaia* of flesh I received [at puberty], which are the outward signs of manhood." That is, *his testicles*.

**Achilles Tattius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.15:** An erotic garden description plays on three terms — *periplokai* (female hair), *peribolai* (male testicles), *symplokai* (mixing of fluids). The pairing of female hair with male testicles is already a literary commonplace.

ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβολαίου δέδοται αὐτῇ

#### 1 Corinthians 11:15b

"Her hair has been given to her instead of a *peribolaion*."

The word *peribolaion* did not have to mean "shawl." It could mean **testicle**. And in context — paired with hair as a body part, in a speech about bodily nature — that is exactly how a first-century Corinthian ear would hear it.

## PART FIVE — MARTIN'S READING: THE EIGHTH INTERPRETATION

Now put it together. Paul's argument from nature in vv. 13–15 is **not** "her hair already covers her, so add another covering anyway." That reading is incoherent — which is why every commentator complains.

### Paul's argument restated:

"Look — by nature, a woman is not given an external testicle (περιβόλαιον). She is given long hair instead — hair that functions, in her body, the way the testicle functions in his."

Hair is part of her reproductive anatomy. It is, in the medical view of the day, *genital tissue on display*.

### 1 Corinthians 11:13 reread:

"Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her genitals exposed*?"

Suddenly the argument is not convoluted. It is uncomfortably direct. And this single reading explains five things at once that the other seven readings each had to fudge:

1. Why "nature" (φύσις) carries the argument — Paul appeals to the universally-shared medical worldview, not to Genesis, not to custom.

2. Why long hair shames a man — it works against his natural function.

3. Why long hair glorifies a woman — it serves her natural function.

4. Why the *peribolaion* in v. 15 is contrasted with hair as a body-part — because it *is* a body part.

5. Why prepubescent girls did not veil but adult women did — Tertullian (*De Virg.* 11–12) makes this very analogy: as testicles begin functioning at puberty for the boy, so hair begins functioning as genitalia for the girl.

#### The Priestly Backdrop:

Priests wear linen breeches “from the loins to the thighs to cover their naked flesh” before approaching the altar (Exodus 28:42–43). The seraphim in Isaiah 6:2 cover their “feet” (a Hebrew euphemism for genitals) in the divine presence. **No exposed genitalia in worship.** That is the rule Paul is pulling forward into the Corinthian assembly.

## PART SIX — “BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS”: GENESIS 6 AND THE MOST CONSISTENT CANONICAL READING

There is one more verse most commentators apologize for — and it locks the entire passage into place once we read it canonically.

*διὰ τοῦτο ὀφείλει ἡ γυνὴ ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους.*

#### 1 Corinthians 11:10 (Greek NT & ESV)

“That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, **because of the angels.**”

Why on earth do *angels* show up in a passage about head coverings? Modern commentaries scatter — guardian angels watching worship, angels offended by disorder, angels as code-word for human messengers, even a textual corruption. None of those readings stretches across the rest of Scripture. **One does.** Go back to Genesis.

### Genesis 6:1–4 in the Septuagint Our Church Uses

*ιδόντες δὲ οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ τὰς θυγατέρας τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὅτι καλαὶ εἰσιν, ἔλαβον ἑαυτοῖς γυναῖκας ἀπὸ πασῶν, ἃς ἐξελέξαντο.*

#### Genesis 6:2 (LXX, Codex Alexandrinus & ESV-style English)

“When the **angels of God** saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful, they took as their wives any they chose.”

The Hebrew reads *bene ha-elohim* — “sons of God.” Many LXX manuscripts (Alexandrinus, Ambrosianus, multiple patristic citations) translate this directly as **οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ** — “the angels of God.” That is the reading the early church grew up with. That is the reading Paul, writing in Greek to Greek-speaking Corinthians who used the LXX, would expect his audience to hear. **The Watchers of Genesis 6 saw, lusted, descended, and took.**

### The Canon Reinforces This Reading — Repeatedly

#### Jude 6 (ESV)

“And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.”

#### 2 Peter 2:4 (ESV)

“God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.”

#### 1 Peter 3:19–20 (ESV)

“He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah.” The Noah cross-reference is exact.

## 1 Enoch 6–11 — the tradition Paul’s audience knew

The Watchers descended on Mt. Hermon, took human women, *and taught them adornment, cosmetics, and uncovering of the head*. The connection between angelic transgression and female adornment is already in the air the Corinthians breathe. Jude even quotes 1 Enoch by name in v. 14.

*Notice the consistency. Every author who mentions these angels — Moses, Peter, Jude, the writer of 1 Enoch — describes the same event the same way: angels who crossed a sexual boundary involving human women, and were chained for it. That is the cleanest, most repeated angel-tradition in the canon.*

## Tertullian Connects the Two Texts Explicitly

### Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 7

“So perilous a face, then, ought to be shaded... So unsafe is a face which has been the cause of [angels] perishing... For if (it is) on account of the angels — those, to wit, whom we read of as having fallen from God and heaven on account of concupiscence after females — who can presume that it was bodies already defiled... that such angels yearned after?”

This is not a 21st-century reach. Tertullian, writing about a century after Paul, reads 1 Cor 11:10 *through* Genesis 6 with no doubt that “the angels” Paul invokes are the Watchers.

## Why This Is the Most Scripturally Consistent View

Reading	Where else does Scripture support it?
Guardian angels watching worship	Nowhere — Hebrews 1:14 calls angels “ministering spirits,” not worship-monitors.
Angels offended by disorder	Nowhere — no canonical text portrays angels as decorum-enforcers.
Human messengers / pastors	Strains the Greek; no parallel in Pauline usage.
<b>Watcher angels of Genesis 6</b>	<b>Gen 6:1–4 LXX • Jude 6 • 2 Pet 2:4 • 1 Pet 3:19–20 • the entire Second-Temple tradition Paul’s audience knew.</b>

Only the Watcher reading has a canonical chain to lean on. Every other reading is invented for the verse and used nowhere else.

## Putting Martin and Genesis 6 Together

- 1 Hair = Female Genitalia**  
In the worldview Paul shares with his audience, hair is a functioning part of female reproductive anatomy (Martin, vv. 13–15).
- 2 Worship Forbids Exposed Genitalia**  
The Levitical priestly principle (Exod 28:42–43) and the seraphim’s covered “feet” (Isa 6:2) make the rule absolute.
- 3 Angels Have Crossed This Boundary Before**  
The Watchers transgressed the human-divine boundary by lusting after women’s bodies (Gen 6 LXX; Jude; 2 Peter). They are not safely past tense.
- 4 Therefore: Cover Up**  
“Because of the angels” (v. 10). Don’t expose what once provoked them. Don’t replay Genesis 6 in the assembly.

Paul is not stitching together random arguments. He is making one argument from one consistent biblical-theological frame: the holy assembly recapitulates Eden and Sinai, not the days of Noah.

## PART SEVEN — SO WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS?

Here is where Martin lands — and it deserves careful pastoral framing.

### Paul's conclusion still stands.

Genitalia are not displayed in the service of God. Every Christian tradition agrees. The principle is biblical, ancient, and unbroken.

### Paul's premise — the medical one — does not stand.

First-century physiology was wrong. Hair is not hollow. It does not draw semen. It is not part of the female reproductive system. As Martin concludes: "no physiological reason remains for continuing the practice of covering women's heads in public worship, and many Christian communities reasonably abandon this practice."

### Three Takeaways for Our Discipleship

1

#### Read Paul as a first-century man speaking to first-century people.

Strip the modern lens off and the "convoluted" passage becomes coherent. That is the *author-and-audience* method.

2

#### Distinguish the timeless principle from its time-bound argument.

Paul's reasoning rests on a worldview that is no longer ours. His pastoral aim — reverent, decent, ordered worship — remains ours.

3

#### Beware confident readings of "what the Bible plainly says."

Eight serious interpretations of one passage is not a sign of a broken Bible. It is a sign that the gap between us and the first century is real, and that humble study — language, culture, medicine, custom — is part of loving the text.

### Discussion Questions

1. If Paul were writing to us today, what argument from "nature" would he use to make the same pastoral point about reverent worship?

2. Which of the seven standard interpretations have you been taught? Where did it come from in your tradition?

3. Does it change your reading of Paul to know his medical assumptions were wrong but his pastoral conclusion still holds? Why or why not?

4. What other "convoluted" passages of Scripture might clear up if we asked the same author-and-audience questions?

5. The Genesis 6 Watchers tradition runs through Jude, 2 Peter, and 1 Peter. Why do you think modern preaching rarely connects 1 Cor 11:10 to it?

### Word Study Cards

περιβόλαιον

peribolaion

Covering / wrap — or, in physiology,  
a testicle

κόμη

komē

Hair — also the suckers of a  
cuttlefish

φύσις

physis

Nature — biological function, not  
custom

**ἄγγελοι**

angeli

Angels / messengers — the  
Watchers of Gen 6**ἐξουσία**

exousia

Authority / sign of authority — the  
"covering"**ἀντι**

anti

Instead of / in place of — the  
contested preposition**CLOSING PRAYER**

Father, You spoke through Paul into a particular moment, with a particular vocabulary, in a particular world. We confess that we have often torn his words from their soil and made them say what they were never sent to say. Give us patience to read him as he wrote — with his Greek, his Septuagint, his medicine, his angels. Let us hold the timeless principle of reverent worship while we release what was only ever first-century furniture. Cover us in Your holiness, not in our certainties. And keep us, Lord, from the Watcher's temptation: from confusing what is holy with what is consumable. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."*

Isaiah 6:3 (ESV) — sung by the seraphim whose "feet" were covered.

**Sources & Further Reading**

**Primary source:** Troy 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): 75–84.

**Ancient sources cited:** Hippocrates (*Nat. puer., Genit., Gland., Mul., Aer., Loc. hom.*); Aristotle (*Gen. an., Probl.*); Soranus (*Gyn.*); Galen (*Def. med.*); Euripides (*Heracles* 1269); Achilles Tatius (*Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.15); Aristophanes (*Ecclesiazusae, Thesmophoriazusae, Lysistrata*); Pseudo-Phocylides 212; Tertullian (*De Virginibus Velandis*); 1 Enoch 6–11.

**Scripture:** Septuagint (LXX, Codex Alexandrinus where noted) and ESV throughout. Greek NT readings from NA28.

**Modern scholarship cited:** E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; V. P. Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians*; M. L. Soards, *1 Corinthians*; A. Jaubert, "Le voile des femmes"; D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*; L. Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science*.

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