

Paul and Women

One question that is sometimes asked is whether Paul should be regarded as the arch-chauvinist among New Testament writers or the promoter *par excellence* of women's rights. This sets out the issue in the sharpest and most provocative of terms, reflecting the polarities with which the scholarly and non-scholarly discussions of Paul's attitude towards women have been conducted. The question, phrased in this way, inevitably calls for some reflection on the appropriateness of using such modern constructs as arch-chauvinist and women's rights in a discussion of first-century material, but it also demands a certain rigour and a clear notion of the required parameters of the task at hand.

The parameters of this unit are set by a consideration of several factors, but in particular I am seeking to determine what *Paul* had to say about the status and role of women in early Christian communities. For that reason I will not consider the evidence of the Pastoral letters, which, as is now widely agreed, are post-Pauline compositions, even though they may well have developed their own position regarding women in the light of their own readings of the Pauline material. Furthermore, even if one focuses on the authentically Pauline letters, it is necessary to consider whether the passages of relevance do derive from Paul himself. This is a particularly important issue when assessing the appeal for women to remain silent in churches, forcefully expressed in I Corinthians 14. Having said that, trying to evaluate Paul's attitude towards women is a huge undertaking, because it not only involves a study of those passages that make explicit reference to women, but also those far more numerous passages where women are absent from Paul's argument. The issue, moreover, can no longer be examined in isolation from the immense contribution of the feminist interpretation of the texts in question.

The focus of this unit must, as a result, be quite narrow and focussed, and, for that reason, I will concentrate on the explicit references to women in the authentically Pauline letters. Furthermore, my interest lies primarily in the role played by women in the context to ministry and worship in the Pauline communities. This stands somewhat apart from the question of what Paul (or one of his followers) had to say about family relationships and structure as outlined in the household codes (Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:22-6:9; cf. 1 Peter 2:18-3:7; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; 6:1-2; Titus 2:2-10). Such codes follow a prescribed hierarchical order and patriarchal structure, in which the head of the household

(the *paterfamilias*) was expected to carry out the responsibilities of husband, father and master, while his wife, children and slaves were subordinate to that head within the structure. These hierarchical structures, as we will see, cast some light on the theological arguments forwarded by Paul concerning the role of women.

Romans 16

What is clear is that some women played an active role in tasks of ministry in the Pauline churches. The references to individual women in the concluding greetings in Romans 16 are well known and I will comment only on some of their most notable features. Despite some discrepancies in the textual tradition (one early manuscript, P⁴⁶, appears to omit Romans 16:1-23), there is strong manuscript evidence for the authenticity of these concluding greetings (Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus). From the point of view of Paul's communicative strategy, it makes perfectly good sense for him to name so many individuals in Rome (twenty-six in total) because he wants to maximise his contacts with a church he had not yet visited.

So, what of the women singled out by Paul for commendation? He notes the 'hard work' of Mary and Persis (16:6, 12), using the same verb to describe their activity (*kopiaō*) as of his own work and of those whose ministry and leadership ought to be recognized. The evidence in fact suggests that the verb *kopiaō* functioned as a technical term to denote missionary activity. Much ink has been spilled over Paul's reference to a figure named Junia who, together with Andronicus, is described as Paul's fellow-prisoner and is commended as 'outstanding among the apostles' (Rom. 16:7). Modern translations often masculinize this name (Junias), even though the masculine form never occurs in ancient sources, while Junia was a common Roman name for a woman. Her description as outstanding among the apostles indicates that she is one of the missionaries recognized as belonging to a distinct group among those whose work is to spread the gospel (cf. Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

Yet another female figure highlighted by Paul in Romans 16 is Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), described as a deacon, note in the masculine form (*diakonos*), and not 'deaconess' (RSV). This may be suggestive of a significant leadership role, particularly as it is a term elsewhere used of prominent members in the early Church (Timothy: 1 Thess. 3:2). Paul bids his readers to help Phoebe in all that she requires; she is described as the *prostatis* of himself and others, a term

which means 'patron' or 'benefactor' (not 'helper', as in the RSV). The lack of reference to a male relation suggests that Phoebe was a single woman or a wealthy widow of influence who took a leading part in her community. Admittedly, Paul does not divulge detail about the precise nature of the roles carried out by these women, but there is nothing in this list to suggest that he attributes to them to a marginal role, or indeed that they worked in ways that differed in nature and quality from the way the men worked.

The involvement of women in the context of worship is described with more detail in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. This, together with the fact that there is virtually no dispute about the authenticity of the passage, explains why it has attracted so much attention in Pauline scholarship, feminist or otherwise.

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

This passage unquestionably shows that Corinthian women had the freedom to pray and prophesy in church gatherings and that Paul endorsed their right to participate vocally in this way (11:4-5). He insists, however, that, different from the men in the congregation, the women must cover their heads, probably with some kind of head-covering or possibly with their long hair (cf. 11:5-6, 15).

The women's practice of not covering their heads may have arisen because of the ambiguity caused by a public gathering being held in a private space (house churches). Their conduct may be due to their appeal to a tradition 'handed over' to them by Paul (11:2) during his founding mission, possibly the baptismal formula recorded in Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. Certain women may have interpreted this formula as a theological warrant for their emancipation from traditional distinctions and roles, although note that when Paul quotes this formula in 1 Corinthians 12:13 he omits the clause 'neither male and female').

Paul, nevertheless, was disturbed by their behaviour and viewed the head-covering as necessary, either to retain a clear gender distinction between men and women or to prevent their meetings from resembling those of the ecstatic cults that were widespread in Corinth (a woman's dishevelled hair was associated with ritual ecstasy). It is difficult to reconstruct what exactly was happening in Corinth, and Paul's way of dealing with this issue is to offer a highly condensed and, in places, quite awkwardly presented, argument in which he

appeals to scripture (11:7-9), to custom (11:13) and even to the principles of nature (11:14). Let us consider some of the main features of Paul's argument:

He approaches the question of head-coverings with an uncompromising statement about an ordained hierarchical order: 'Christ is the head of every man, and the husband (man) is the head of the wife (woman), and God is the head of Christ' (11:3). Paul links this to the issue of head-coverings by playing on the literal and metaphorical meanings of the word 'head' (*kephalē*). But does its metaphorical application here mean 'ruler', implying that a husband has authority over his wife, or does it mean 'source', with the emphasis on the creation of the woman from the body of man? If the latter meaning is intended, gender difference is confirmed but there is a softening of any sense of superiority or subordination.

To interpret Paul's line of argument one must, nevertheless, also take into account 1 Corinthians 11:7-9, where he states that the man was created first, the woman was created out of him (cf. Gen. 2:21-23) and that the woman was created for the sake of the man (cf. 2:18). To reinforce his argument that a woman must cover her head because she is the 'reflection' of man, the creation of woman 'out of man' becomes, for Paul, the warrant for man's pre-eminence over woman. He is clearly promoting a hierarchical view of creation, in which man has priority over the woman. This does not necessarily imply his authority over her (see further below).

The interplay of the literal and metaphorical meanings of the word 'head' continues in 11:4-6, where the notion of uncovering the head signifies disrespect for one's superior in the hierarchy. The theme of shame continues in 11:6 where Paul notes that it is disgraceful (lit. 'shame') for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved. This is one of only two occurrences of the term 'shame' (*aischros*) in Paul's letters, the other being 14:35 where the issue of a woman speaking in church is also described as a matter of shame. Paul is drawing, in this respect, on terminology characteristic of the hierarchically structured and patriarchal society in the first-century Mediterranean world, one shaped by the values of honour and shame. Cultural anthropological study has demonstrated that a group or family's social acceptability depended on, and was symbolized by, the honour of its 'head' (the *paterfamilias*) and *vice versa*. Paul is thus urging the Corinthian women to abandon a practice that causes shame because it crosses gender boundaries between the sexes and their respective roles.

As already noted, in 11:7-9 Paul develops his argument by drawing on the Genesis accounts to stress woman's secondary place in the order of creation: 'For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory (NRSV: reflection) of God; but woman is the glory of man'. This is an intriguing reading of the Genesis text, which quite clearly states that both male and female were created in the image of God (1:27). Paul's omission of the word 'image' with reference to woman may be due to his dependence on current Jewish exegesis of Genesis 1:27 (*Life of Adam and Eve* interprets the verse with reference to Adam, but not to Eve) or it results from his reading of Genesis 1 through the lens of the second creation account, where woman is created after man and out of man (to which he alludes in 11:8).

What is the intended force of the highly compact statement in 11:10 concerning a woman's head-covering as, literally, 'an authority on her head'? Traditionally this has been taken to mean 'authority over her', in the sense that the head-covering is a sign of men's authority over women. However, the Greek text at this point does not read 'over her', but simply states that a woman must wear an authority *on* her head (as correctly rendered in the NRSV). It probably denotes the woman's right to 'exercise authority': the head-covering is a symbol of her own authority to pray and prophesy. Paul's reasoning seems to be this: for a woman to pray with her head uncovered would be to reflect the glory of man rather than God. This glory must be hidden, so that in prayer she only gives glory to God. The man is not expected to cover his head because his head is the image or reflection of the glory of God and that glory is to be allowed to shine forth.

Paul seems to moderate his argument in 11:11-12 by affirming the mutual interdependence of women and men 'in the Lord', that is, in the new eschatological community. He provides an analogy from the created order by drawing on the second creation account ('just as woman came from man'), followed by a reference to the human life cycle through childbirth ('so man comes through woman'). Thus while gender distinctions are not eradicated (from/through), there is mutuality 'in the Lord' and unity in that 'all things come from God' (12:12b). At the end of the passage Paul returns to the issue of social and cultural norms by asking whether it is proper (*prepon*) for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered, a word frequently used in Graeco-Roman sources to express conformity to social values and customs. He also states that

'nature' teaches that long hair is degrading for a man but glorious for a woman (cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.16.9-14).

Is Paul's argument on head-coverings consistent? In the earlier part he uses woman's creation from man to reinforce her secondary status in the hierarchical chain (11:8), but then the tables seem to be turned when he uses the same scriptural proof to affirm their mutuality in the new relationship brought about by Christ. These two readings of the creation account are not wholly irreconcilable (hierarchy is set in a fine balance with mutuality), but it does reflect Paul's struggle to make two contexts stand side by side: that is, the Corinthians' setting within a Graeco-Roman context (with its in-built hierarchy in a culture of honour and shame) and their new reality in the context of early Christian worship in which both women and men are given the gifts of the Spirit to pray and prophesy (cf. 12:11: the Spirit distributes gifts 'as it chooses').

Are these arguments, moreover, consistent with Paul's own theological vision, particularly as expressed in Galatians 3:28? In terms of his emphasis on the created distinction between man and woman, placed within the larger picture of mutuality, his arguments are consistent with his claim that the community should remain in the condition in which they were called (7:17-24); the issue of gender identity continues to be valid. A believer's new identity in Christ does not erase maleness and femaleness, but, as in Galatians 3:28, Paul does speak of a new humanity without gender discrimination. What becomes clear, as this exegetical analysis has sought to demonstrate, is that while Paul does call for the establishment of a proper distinction between men and women, he does not argue for the superiority or authority of men over women. His advice is that women must pray and prophesy as women, and men must do so as men. The strained aspect in his argument is that he establishes a hierarchy based on gender. By giving advice on the practical issue of head-coverings, his theological argument is underpinned by the view that woman has a place below man in the created order. This advice could, of course, have wider implications beyond the context of worship, leading to the legitimisation of domination and authority in other relationships between men and women. And this is what seems to have happened in the case of such writings as the Pastoral letters (I Tim. 2:11-15; I Peter 3:1-7).

I Corinthians 14:33-35

If Paul affords properly attired Corinthian women the right to participate vocally in worship, how can this be harmonised with I Corinthians 14:33-35 where Paul calls on women to keep silent? As part of his advice on proper conduct in worship he states: 'As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.'

Various attempts have been made to explain the force of these instructions in a way that retains coherence within the same letter:

- i) Paul may be speaking in 11:5 of private rather than public prophecy, but this is an artificial distinction, particularly as I Corinthians 11 is about worship within the assembly. Like other spiritual gifts, prophecy is for the benefit of others (12:7).
- ii) The prohibition in 1 Corinthians 14 is not concerned with banning Corinthian women from prayer or prophesying, but with restricting certain kinds of disruptive speech or 'chattering'. However, the call for women's silence in 14:34-35 is absolute, with no exception given.
- iii) A related suggestion is that the women described in chapter 11 were unmarried, whereas the restriction in chapter 14 applies only to married women. The use of the word *gynē* is certainly confusing because it can mean both 'wife' and 'woman'. If it does refer to wives, it could mean that they were passing judgements on prophecies uttered by their husbands, which would amount to them questioning the authority of the head of the household (once again, an ambiguity caused by public gatherings held in private homes). Despite the obvious advantages of this view, there is no evidence that Paul's advice in 11:2-16 only applies to unmarried women (the ambiguity of the word *gynē* affects the interpretation of this passage as well).

None of these proposals is fully satisfactory. In fact, there are strong reasons for regarding 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as a later interpolation, due to its many non-Pauline features: it assumes that all women are married and it makes, what is for Paul, an uncharacteristically unqualified appeal to the Law (he usually cites the text in question and uses it in his argument; cf. 1 Cor. 9:8-9; 14:21). What tips the balance, however, is the text-critical issue: many manuscripts of the Western text have vv. 34-35 in a different position, as a distinct paragraph, at the end of the chapter. Verse 36 makes perfectly good sense immediately after Paul's comment in verse 33: having maintained that God's way is one of peace

and disorder, he ridicules any claim to independence which might resist such instruction. It is also noteworthy that in his concluding comments in 14:37-40, Paul repeats the issues raised by him in this chapter (prophets and those who claim to have spiritual powers), but there is no mention of women. All these factors strongly suggest that Paul is not the author of these verses. They were added as a marginal note by an interpreter who, in the words of Gordon Fee, 'felt that women should be kept in their place' (*1 Corinthians*, 699-705). In this respect the passage bears resemblance to examples of post-Pauline pastoral instruction (especially I Timothy 2:11-15, where women are told to be silent and submissive, are prohibited from teaching, and are told that their learning must be done in silence and submission).

Recovery of the Corinthian Women

The passages so far considered, Pauline and non-Pauline, offer explicit references to, and provide certain insights into, the role of women in the Corinthian congregation. Is it, therefore, possible to identify an even greater involvement by women in the issues addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians? This question is raised because of the enormous impact of one book in particular on feminist interpretation of Paul, namely Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983). Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to offer a reconstruction of early Christianity as a movement in which women's roles and their struggle for equality are, in her words, recoverable from texts that were written by men and in which women are often silenced and excluded. This interpretative perspective has been applied with great vigour to the text of 1 Corinthians, in an attempt to uncover the (partly) hidden story of women's much wider involvement in church life and in the disputes in Corinth. Two such studies are worthy of brief comment.

First, Margaret MacDonald has argued that the women prophets of 1 Corinthians 11 were the main advocates of the sexual asceticism about which Paul expresses unease in chapter 7. These women, she claims, were reverting to celibacy because of their radical interpretation of the tradition reflected in Galatians 3:26-28, with its assertion that 'there is neither male and female'. In other words, they sought to express their newfound equality in Christ by adopting a state of androgyny. Of course, there are no clear indications from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that women were the instigators of this state of affairs. The slogan from the Corinthians' letter in verse 1 is formulated from a male perspective, 'It is well for a *man* not to touch a woman', implying that it was men

(not women) who were urging sexual abstinence. MacDonald responds by claiming that Paul is here masking what is for him a more uncomfortable reality: women as the main proponents of this asceticism: he balances his address to the men with exhortations to the women, and on some occasions (7:10-13, 39-40) he gives even more attention to the women than the men. In other words, Paul is making a careful attempt at gender balance in order to distract from the reality of the situation.

Before commenting on the methodological issues raised by this approach, Antoinette Wire's influential study on 1 Corinthians must be mentioned. She goes much further than Margaret MacDonald by claiming that the group of female prophets who come to the fore in 1 Corinthians 11 are in fact addressed by Paul throughout the letter. Through a close rhetorical analysis of Paul's arguments she proposes that he is responding vigorously to the social experience and theological claims of these women. They understand themselves to be resurrected to a new life in Christ, refuse their own subjection within patriarchal family structures, and lay claim to the gift of spiritual insight and the right to prophesy.

It is indeed possible that women played a more prominent role in Corinth than what comes to the surface in Paul's text, but the central issue raised by these recent studies is the method by which interpreters use Paul's text to build a profile of the church at Corinth. An interpreter who focuses on explicit clues in the text – such as direct references to events and Paul's citations of Corinthian slogans – accept that Paul is offering a fairly accurate picture of Corinthian beliefs. However, Wire, building on the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, treats Paul's rhetoric with a hermeneutic of suspicion, arguing that, to a considerable extent, he is trying to conceal the true nature of events in Corinth by making men rather than women his primary referents. The aim is to move from the rhetorical situation presented by Paul in the text to the actual historical context of the Corinthian community.

The challenge, of course, is to determine whether it is possible (as Wire claims) to sift through Paul's rhetorical - and in her view misleading - argumentation in order to uncover, with confidence, the actual events that lie behind his rhetoric. What is not given adequate consideration by Wire are Paul's communicative aims: if he wanted his letter to be persuasive, he would surely need to present the situation in a way that was credible to his readers, and capable of convincing

them to change their attitudes and practice. This is not to deny that a letter like 1 Corinthians presents enormous challenges to those who are engaged in historical reconstruction. It is after all a letter that only allows us to hear one side of the conversation. Nevertheless, what recent feminist work on the Corinthian correspondence does is sharpen our awareness of the ways in which the interests and ideological commitments of scholars can influence their descriptions of the role of women in the Pauline communities - whether that is to recover the silent voices of the Corinthian women or, as has dominated centuries of interpretation of this text, that what Paul in fact demands is their absolute silence and submission to men.

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