

Eat, Pray, Love: Sacrifice-Eating and Ritual Sexuality as Unifying Motifs in 1 Corinthians 8–11

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Introduction

The relationship of the various sections between the third and fourth *περὶ δὲ* statements in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 8:1–11:34) is not entirely clear, leading some scholars to suggest various divisions or rearrangements of the material. This paper suggests that the cultic practices of ancient Israel described (and idealized) in the Pentateuch, specifically with respect to ritual eating and sexuality, serve as a unifying motif for 1 Corinthians 8–11.

Eating and sexual intercourse are viewed as sacred acts in many cultures for their generative capacity with respect to the human body, and their significance for communing with other beings (animals, humans, non-material beings). Thus, they are governed by rules and taboos, and are part of religious ritual.

Ancient Israelite law provided many detailed requirements for eating as part of cultic activity, and also strict parameters for the sexual activity of priests. Yet ritual sexual activity was not part of “orthodox” Israelite worship, though clearly some ancient Israelites practiced sexual rites.

Against this backdrop of the generative and communicative function of ritual eating and intercourse, Paul applies his understanding of Israelite scripture to various practical issues faced by the Corinthian believers. The relationships between Jews and non-Jews, believers and non-believers, Israel’s deity and other spiritual entities, men and women, “clergy and laity,” and Christ and the church—are linked in Paul’s discourse by the common thread of the generative and communicative power of food and sex.

Methodological Considerations

In this study, I approach 1 Corinthians 8–11 and the Hebrew Bible without depending on any particular theories of the compositional histories of the texts under examination. I will presume the consensus view that 1 Corinthians may be attributed to Paul himself. I am also not intending to assert that there *must be* theological consistency or thematic coherence in 1 Corinthians 8–11; that is the very question at hand. I do not think it is necessary to impose such criteria on the letter as we have it, though I will argue that there is some “rhyme and reason” to Paul’s choice of topics in 1 Corinthians 8–11.

I will also presume—uncontroversially, I hope—that Paul’s own theological framework is heavily dependent upon the Jewish scriptures. His teachings reflect Pharisaic understandings of the

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nature of the God of Israel and other divine beings, worship, food and sexuality, which are derived from legislative and narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible (and the LXX). It is widely debated among scholars of the Hebrew Bible and the ANE how exactly the various legislative texts were formed and how they functioned in Israelite and Jewish communities. While the compositional history, interpretation and application of such texts is important, it is sufficient to assert that Paul himself believed they were Mosaic/prophetic in origin, and that the texts were normative for belief and behavior. I am not here to litigate any particular case concerning D vs. P, legal blends and revisions, or whether anyone in ancient Israel actually followed the ritual practices outlined in the Pentateuch. All that is relevant is what Paul believed about these texts.

Eat! And, Pray! But, No Love

As a biblical scholar who mainly focuses on the Hebrew Bible, particularly on the interplay between narrative and legal traditions, I have been fascinated by the contrast between the portraits of sexuality and eating (in law and story). Both food and sex are presented as essential parts of human existence within the good creation. Both are to be enjoyed, but within strict parameters—some restrictions that we would categorize as relating to “morality,” and others that seem to relate to ritual purity and fitness for sacred space. Yet food is an essential part of the worship of YHWH, while sexuality is consistently excluded from YHWH worship in the perspectives presented in the Hebrew Bible.

Sex and Display of Reproductive Organs Precluded from YHWH Worship

If sexual behavior within marriage was understood as pleasing to YHWH, as numerous scriptures attest,¹ why couldn't marital sex (between a priest and his wife, for example) be part of Yahwistic worship? Indeed, the ability to consummate a marriage was a prerequisite for being a priest in YHWH's service (Lev 21:13, 20; cf. Deut 23:1). Despite the essential goodness of sexual union in marriage, nowhere does scripture condone the performance of marital sex as part of ritual. Even though it does appear that some Israelite communities used sexual rites in the worship of YHWH, a consort, and other deities,² the Hebrew Bible's various voices are unanimous in condemning cultic sexual behavior (e.g., Deut 23:17).³ The texts frequently link cultic sexuality to the worship of gods other than YHWH.

In fact, several passages emphasize the importance of covering up sexual organs in the presence of YHWH for worship. Steps to YHWH's altar are forbidden, so that the priest's or worshiper's robe will not come up and expose the private parts, even for a moment (Exod 20:26). Furthermore, Aaron and his sons, the priests, must wear special undergarments to ensure that their “loins and thighs”—both words are euphemistic for “genitals”—must be completely covered in YHWH's presence (Exod 28:40–43). In Isaiah's vision, even the heavenly beings cover their “feet” (another euphemism for “genitals”) with their wings in YHWH's presence (Isa 6:1–3).

Moreover, the mere presence of reproductive fluids such as menstrual blood, post-partem blood, and semen on a person or object renders he/she or it unfit for sacred space (Lev 12; 15).

Sex within marriage is regulated but good and necessary; priests are expected to have marital sex and produce children. It is striking, then, that the Hebrew Bible so stridently forbids even a hint of sexuality (such as the partial exposure of private parts) in YHWH's presence.⁴

¹ Gen 1:28; Prov 5:18–19; Song of Songs.

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³ Richard A. Henshaw provides a survey of the various terms used to describe cultic personnel who oversaw or engaged in sexual behavior in ancient Mesopotamia: *Female and Male: The Cultic Personnel. The Bible and the Rest of the Ancient Near East* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 31; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1994), 191–270.

⁴ The answer may be found, I believe, in the ability of humans to reflect YHWH's creative power as his images. In the sexual act, a man and a woman are capable of doing something that only YHWH can do: create another *imago Dei*. It is good and right that human beings do so (within the bounds that YHWH has prescribed). But this creative act should not even be alluded to in worship, where YHWH himself and YHWH alone is the object of

Ritual Eating Is Essential to YHWH Worship

By contrast, eating is an essential part of the worship of YHWH. Of the various kinds of sacrifices outlined in Leviticus 1–7 and the festival offerings prescribed in the ritual calendars of the Pentateuch (Exod 23:14–19; Lev 23; Num 28–29; Deut 18), many involve eating. Leviticus outlines at least four categories of sacrifices with respect to what is eaten:

- 1) Offerings which are wholly consumed by fire (priest receives skin);⁵
- 2) Offerings which are partly consumed by priest(s) in the temple;⁶
- 3) Offerings which are partly brought home by the priest for consumption by his family (still consecrated);⁷ and
- 4) Offerings which are partly consumed by priest and worshiper (with household) in the sanctuary (שֶׁלֶם).⁸

It is this last kind of offering, the שֶׁלֶם or “peace/well-being offering,” which would appear to constitute the majority of offerings. In the well-being offering, the worshippers, the priest and the

adoration as Creator. To expose sexual organs or celebrate sexuality in worship is to “steal YHWH’s thunder” as the one from whom humanity’s creative power is derived.

⁵ The details of the עֹלָה, usually translated “burnt offering” or “whole burnt offering” (or the archaic “holocaust”), are provided in Leviticus 1:1–17 and 6:8–13 [MT 6:1–6]. The עֹלָה is completely “turned to smoke” (הִקְטִיר), after being skinned (1:6, 9). The offering “remains on the hearth on the altar all night” (6:9) and is completely “reduced to ashes by the fire” (6:10). The ashes are then scattered “in a clean place outside the camp” (6:11). The most important aspect of the sacrifice for the present question is that no edible meat is gleaned from the עֹלָה; the only useable product is the hide of the animal, which belongs to the administering priest (7:8).

⁶ The details of the חֲטָאת, “sin offering,” and the אֲשָׁם, “guilt offering,” are provided in Leviticus 4:1–6:7 [4:1–5:26] and 6:24–7:10 [6:17–7:10]. While the entrails, the head, and the fat around the entrails are burned on the altar, the priests are permitted to eat portions of these sacrifices “in a holy place” (6:26 [6:19]; 7:6–7)—either the administering priest, or “every male among the priests.”

The details of the מִנְחָה (“grain offering”) are given in Leviticus 2 and 6:14–18 [6:7–11]. A portion of the grain/flour and oil is mixed with frankincense and burned as a pleasing aroma to YHWH (6:15 [6:8]). Aaron and his sons then cook and eat what is left as unleavened cakes (6:16–18 [6:9–11]). Further priestly instructions specify that certain grain offerings are eaten by the administering priest only, but other offerings are shared by the priests (7:9–10).

⁷ Several other passages in Leviticus specify who may eat of the priests’ portion of the sacrificial offerings. The priests must eat the bread from the מִנְחָה in the holy place (10:12–13), but the breast and thigh which is their portion may be eaten by their families “in any clean place (10:14–15).

The consumption of the priests’ portion is thus not limited to those who were permitted to administer the sacrifice. In addition to immediate family members, an Aaronide who have some defect and “may not approach to offer the food of his God” (לֹא יִקְרַב לְהִקְרִיב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהִי) may still eat the food from the offerings (21:21–22), “both the most holy and the holy” (מִקְשָׁדֵי הַקִּדְשִׁים וּמִן־הַקִּדְשִׁים), implying that the priests brought home some of the offerings to their extended families.

Leviticus 22:4–16 outlines further the restrictions on who may eat of the sacrificial food. No son of Aaron may eat in a state of uncleanness (22:4–9). All members of the priest’s household—including purchased slaves, but not hired or bound servants—may eat of the food (22:10–11). If a priest’s daughter marries a layman (אִישׁ זָר), she becomes ineligible to eat the food unless she returns to her father’s house by divorce or widowhood (22:12–13). If a layman eats a holy gift unintentionally, he must repay it to the priest, plus one-fifth (22:14–16).

Finally, the “bread of the presence,” which is not sacrificial but a perpetual ritual, must be eaten by Aaron and his sons “in a holy place” (בְּמִקְוֵם קֹדֶשׁ; 24:5–9).

Interestingly, the book of Leviticus says little about “tithes” that are paid to the Levites (in fact, there is little about the Levites proper in the book at all; see Schnittjer, *Torah Story*, 289). Only in Numbers 18 is the idea of tithes elaborated. Within this fifth category, certain offerings and tithes became part of the priests’ and Levites’ portions, i.e., they could dispose of them how they wished (18:8–32).

⁸ The details of the שֶׁלֶם may be discerned by reading Leviticus 7:12–36 and 17:1–7 together. The latter passage clarifies that in the narrative setting of the wilderness wanderings all slaughters of domestic animals are considered to be שְׁלָמִים and would need to be conducted by the priests at the doorway of the Tent of Meeting. Deuteronomy 12 and 14 revise this impractical pattern of sacrifice: domestic slaughter is desacralized, and only ritual slaughter must be conducted in “the place which YHWH will choose to set his name to dwell there.” For further discussion of this narrative phenomenon, see Benjamin D. Giffone, “According to Which ‘Law of Moses’? Cult Centralization in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles,” *VT* 67 (2017): 434–435.

deity share a meal together, signifying peace between the participants and mutual enjoyment of fellowship. The signification of peace and joy is found both in legislative and narrative texts (Exod 24:9–11; Deut 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 1 Kgs 8:62–66; etc.)

Ritual eating also serves as one form of provision for the priests and the Levites, who did not receive an inheritance of land. Though for some kinds of ritual slaughter the priest appears merely to be eating a token portion to symbolize YHWH's acceptance of the offering, in other circumstances the offerings, especially the well-being offerings, were enough to provide for the priest and his family to eat some meat (Lev 21:21–22; 22:4–16). Tithes of all produce were allotted to the Levites, including the priests (Num 18:21–28; Deut 12:12; 14:27–29). While some offerings appear to be “sacrificial” in the sense commonly meant by moderns—that is, no tangible benefit comes directly to a human being through the ritual itself—many of the offerings served this purpose of provision for the cultic personnel.

Ritual Eating and Sex in Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman Religious Practice

Ritual eating described and prescribed in the Hebrew Bible is well within the bounds of what we find in ancient Near Eastern practice—in fact, food as part of religious ritual is nearly ubiquitous.⁹ Newton has provided a sweeping survey of the social and religious function of eating in Greco-Roman cultic contexts.¹⁰

While it is probably the case that Israelite, Jewish and Christian polemics against the religious practices of their neighbors at times exaggerated the prevalence of cultic sexual activity, it is true that such activity was found on the religious map of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. Holland describes Mesopotamian religious practices of so-called *hieros gamos* between the king or ruler and a priestess,¹¹ and “sacred prostitution” between male worshippers and priestesses in exchange for temple donations.¹² At least the latter practice, and possibly the former, was known in Syro-Palestine.¹³ Regarding the Greco-Roman context and Corinth specifically, Fee remarks:

Conzelmann has shown decisively that the temple prostitution in connection with the temple of Aphrodite mentioned in Strabo belonged to a former time. On the other hand, the story narrated in Josephus about the lady Paulina, who ‘after supper’ at the temple had nightlong sex with Mundus, thinking he was the god Anubis, suggests that such possibilities still existed in the shrines of the Hellenistic period.¹⁴

⁹ For example, Beckman describes the range of foods used in Hittite ritual activities: honey, oil, fruit, flour, ghee, cheese; “a wide array of baked goods”; potable liquids (wine, beer, and milk); “meat, sometimes in astounding quantities (in one festival 1,000 sheep and 50 oxen)”; see Gary Beckman, “How Religion Was Done,” in Daniel Snell, ed., *Companion to the Ancient Near East* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 348.

¹⁰ Derek Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth* (JNTSSup 169; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 175–257.

¹¹ “Inanna’s presence brought life and vitality to human beings and animals. She provoked and inspired them to engage in sexual intercourse, and made the plants of the earth plentiful and fruitful. The beneficial power of fertility inspired by Inanna and Dumuzi was celebrated in an annual rite of sacred marriage. Although the details are not clear, the ritual apparently involved sexual intercourse between the priestess of Inanna and the kin of the city, probably in Inanna’s temple. The sacred marriage (known technically by the Greek term *hieros gamos*) was essentially a symbolic ritual act. Sexual intercourse between the priestess and the king imitated but also evoked the intercourse between Inanna and Dumuzi as an earthly reenactment of a timeless event”; Glenn S. Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 119.

¹² “The sacred marriage is also related to what is often called ‘sacred prostitution’ in the temples of Ishtar, when priestesses of the goddess would have intercourse with male worshippers in return for a monetary donation to the temple. Both the Greek historian Herodotus and various authors of works found in the Hebrew Bible condemned this practice as immoral and, indeed, cited it as a prime example of the decadence they thought was typical of Mesopotamia” (Holland, *Gods in the Desert*, 173).

¹³ Holland, *Gods in the Desert*, 203.

¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 503.

Others are more cautious. Rosner presents evidence of what he calls “temple prostitution”: “prostitution at cultic events of a festive nature”—but argues that there is little direct evidence for “sacred prostitution,” ritual sex designed to “increase fecundity and fertility,” in Corinth.¹⁵

Our focus is not so much the reality of ritual practice at Corinth specifically, but what Paul apparently believed about such practices. I am not suggesting that Paul was responding to Corinthians’ questions about ritual sex, but that ritual sex and eating are part of the conceptual “furniture” that Paul arranges in the “room” of his arguments/answers (and that the pieces of furniture match!). If Paul was aware of the sexual revelry of pagan feasts, it is conceivable that “sacred” and “temple” prostitution as Rosner distinguishes them may have been conflated in Paul’s understanding. Regardless, the association of sex and food with pagan ritual is strong in at least part of the text (1 Cor 10:7), which provides us with warrant to examine the motif in the surrounding passages.

Summary

The conception of religious ritual that stands behind Paul’s discourse in 1 Corinthians 8–11 is this:

- 1) Priests are sustained by eating portions of offerings and tithes.
- 2) Worshippers and priests eat sacrifices to commune with the deity.
- 3) Priests must be able to have sex and reproduce.
- 4) Sexuality as a way of communing with the deity was believed and practiced in the wider culture.
- 5) Sexuality must not be part of the worship of YHWH, including any display of reproductive organs.

Ritual Eating and Sex in 1 Corinthians 8–11

With the cultic significance of both food and sex in mind, we may now examine 1 Corinthians 8–11 to see if these motifs can be said to “unify” this section in any way—and where they intertwine and overlap. While in the first six chapters of the letter Paul addresses issues of his own concern, in chapter seven he apparently turns his attention to a series of issues on which the church has asked for his teaching. Following the initial statement in 7:1, Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε (“But concerning the things of which you wrote...”), we find Περὶ δὲ statements in 7:25, 8:1¹⁶, 12:1, and twice in chapter 16 (vv. 1, 12). The statement in 1 Corinthians 11:34b (“And the remaining matters I will command when I come”) seems to mark a significant transition in the topics.

At first glance, then, it is reasonable to start with an outline that considers 1 Corinthians 8–11 to be a unit answering a question about idol-meat (8:1, 4). Interestingly, however, many commentators choose to connect 11:2–34 with chapters 12 to 14 under a heading such as, “Public Worship” (Morris¹⁷, Hays¹⁸, Conzelmann¹⁹). Others appear to recognize some sort of boundary at

¹⁵ Brian S. Rosner, “Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20,” *NovT* 40 (1998): 348–349.

¹⁶ Following the Περὶ δὲ introduction in 8:1, we find also Περὶ ... οὗν in 8:4, which continues the same subject (τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων).

¹⁷ Morris structures the book with sections as follows: “Meat Sacrificed to Idols 8:1–11:1”; “Disorders in Public Worship 11:2–14:40.” Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 33.

¹⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1997).

¹⁹ Conzelmann adopts the structure, “Chapters 8–10, Freedom and Idol Sacrifices”; “Chapters 12–14, Community, Divine Service, and the Spirit”; while also labeling 11:2–14:40, “Questions of Divine Worship.” Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; trans. James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975 [1969]), viii.

12:1 (Περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν), but do not recognize an organic connection between chapter 11 and the three that precede it (Bruce²⁰, Fee²¹).

While “idol meat” and matters of conscience might not seem to us to be connected to sexuality, gender and propriety in worship, for Paul’s audience of Jews and Gentiles matters of ritual eating and sex were intimately connected. I will here examine the texts of 1 Corinthians 8–11, suggesting ways in which the motif of participating with the deity through ritual eating and sex should inform interpretation. I begin with the provocative contention that ritual sexual activity is the background for 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. The next step will be to show the overlap between ritual eating and sex in two passages, one more obvious and the other less so. Finally, the other passages will then be shown to connect to one or the other of these motifs, demonstrating a coherence in these four chapters.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16: Display of Reproductive Organs in Worship

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is one of the most widely-discussed and difficult passages in the Pauline corpus, because of its obscurity, its unpalatability to modern interpreters, and apparently conflicting statements about whether hair constitutes a head covering. It is also the most problematic section for trying to discern an overall theme in the section. Without this interruption, the conclusion of the discussion of idol-meat and participation with Christ or demons (10:14–11:1) would flow appropriately into the instructions for the Lord’s Supper (11:17–34).

Troy Martin argued quite provocatively in a 2004 article that περιβόλαιον, which is used in 11:15 and translated as “covering,” is used in Greek physiological and literary texts to mean “testicle.”²² The verse would therefore mean that a woman’s long hair is given to her “in place of a testicle.” While this interpretation may seem quite obscure, Martin marshals a great deal of evidence from Greco-Roman sources that a woman’s long hair on her head was understood to be part of her reproductive system. Hair was thought to be hollow; long hair on the head allowed the woman to draw semen up into her body, where it would congeal into a fetus.²³

This ancient physiological conception of hair indicates that Paul’s argument from nature in 1 Cor 11:13–15 contrasts long hair in women with testicles in men. Paul states that appropriate to her nature, a woman is not given an external testicle (περιβόλαιον, 1 Cor 11:15b) but rather hair instead. Paul states that long hollow hair on a woman’s head is her glory (δόξα, 1 Cor 11:15) because it enhances her female φύσις, which is to draw in and retain semen. Since female hair is part of the female genitalia, Paul asks the Corinthians to judge for themselves whether it is proper for a woman to display her genitalia when praying to God (1 Cor 11:13).²⁴

Martin then connects this understanding to the Hebrew Bible’s prohibitions about displaying reproductive organs in the worship of YHWH:

Informed by the Jewish tradition, which strictly forbids display of genitalia when engaged in God’s service, Paul’s argument from nature cogently supports a woman’s covering her head when praying or prophesying. . . . Paul appropriately instructs women in the service of God to cover their hair since it is part of the female genitalia. According to Paul’s argument, women may pray or prophesy in public worship along with men but only when both are *decently* attired.²⁵

²⁰ Bruce treats chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 separately, and then designates 12–14 as “The Question of Spiritual Gifts.” F. F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 23.

²¹ Fee divides into “Food Sacrificed to Idols (8:1–11:1)”; “Women and Men in Worship (11:2–16)”; “Abuse of the Lord’s Supper (11:17–34)”; and “Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual People (12:1–14:40).” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 22–23.

²² Troy W. Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13–15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering,” *JBL* 123.1 (2004): 75–84.

²³ Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature,” 77–79.

²⁴ Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature,” 83.

²⁵ Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature,” 83–84 (emphasis original).

Although responses to Martin’s thesis have been mixed²⁶, I find myself quite persuaded by his evidence, which has the benefit of making sense of Paul’s apparently conflicting instructions. Moreover, it makes better sense of the reference to a woman having a symbol of authority “because of the angels” (11:10) than some other options that have been proposed.²⁷ If long hair is understood as part of a woman’s reproductive system, her head-covering is analogous to the seraphim covering their genitals in YHWH’s presence (Isa 6:2). Paul recognizes the equality of men and women as conduits of revelation, but also the inherent biological differences and their complementary roles in sex.²⁸

Consistent with the Hebrew Bible, human reproductive capacity should not even be *hinted at* in the worship of YHWH. Understanding the head-covering instructions in this way provides a sensible connection back to 10:1–13 and 9:4–14, which both connect food, sex, and priestly duties.

1 Corinthians 10:1–13: Food, Sex, Grumbling: Rejecting YHWH as Creator and Sustainer

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 we find the most straightforward association of worship, ritual eating and sex: “And do not be idol-worshippers as some of them were, as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play’” (10:7),²⁹ quoting verbatim from LXX Exodus 32:6b.³⁰ Exodus 32 portrays the Israelites as adopting non-sanctioned worship practices for the worship of YHWH (the “god who brought you out of the land of Egypt”; 32:4), including the use of

²⁶ See the assessment of Mark Goodacre and Martin’s response: Goodacre, “Does περιβόλαιον Mean ‘Testicle’ in 1 Corinthians 11:15?” *JBL* 130.2 (2011): 391–396; Martin, “Περιβόλαιον as ‘Testicle’ in 1 Corinthians 11:15: A Response to Mark Goodacre,” *JBL* 132.2 (2013): 453–465.

Christopher Mount is persuaded by Martin’s thesis: “1 Corinthians 11:3–16: Spirit Possession and Authority in a Non-Pauline Interpolation,” *JBL* 124 (2005): 313–40.

Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner admit: “Even if one does not accept Troy Martin’s (unlikely) proposal that the word normally translated ‘covering’ in v. 15 should be understood as a reference to the male testicle, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that women’s hair was understood to be an object of intense sexual attraction and even possibly as part of her genitalia. It has been suggested that for a mature Roman woman to expose herself (or her hair) to the penetrating sexual gaze of a man other than her husband was the virtual equivalent of announcing that she was available for other types of sexual penetration”; Pillar NTC, 517–518. Ciampa and Rosner point also to Laetitia La Lollette, “The Costume of the Roman Bride,” in *The World of Roman Costume* (ed. Judith Lyn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante; Wisconsin Studies in Classics; Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), who argues that “The hair of the sexually mature woman was, as we have seen, a potent reservoir of the powers of fertility. Boels has pointed out the close connection between marriage and the combing of the hair of the Flaminica Dialis in Roman religion and has suggested that the combing of the Flaminica’s (and by extension, any woman’s) hair was symbolic of conjugal union. The touching of the spear to the bride’s hair, according to Boels, meant the conjuring up of the woman’s fertility” (60).

Michael Lakey concludes: “Martin’s proposal that περιβόλαιον signifies testicle also has the merit of coherence. However, given the paucity of evidence to suggest either Paul’s or the Corinthians’ awareness of the association, it is only the force of possible contradiction which supports his reading, especially since the topic of this passage (female covering) tends to support the traditional reading of περιβόλαιον as ‘cover’”; *Image and the Glory of God: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as a Case Study in Bible, Gender and Hermeneutics* (LNTS 418; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 120–121.

Fee (NICNT 2014) does not address Martin’s article; Joseph A. Fitzmyer (First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary [Anchor Yale Bible 32; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008], 421) describes Martin’s proposal as “completely far-fetched,” but without further explanation.

²⁷ “Paul’s cryptic remark could refer to angels in a variety of capacities: angels who lusted after human women in Gen. 6:4, angels as guardians of the created order similar to the Satan of Job 1:6–7, or heavenly angels worshipping God. In each example the ritual gesture that Paul requires compensates for a defective female nature that would otherwise endanger her or the holiness of the angelic assembly. She could be attacked by lustful angels (demons), or be subject to divine punishment for violating the order of creation, or be considered a source of contamination if angels were thought to be present as the Christian assembly gathered in worship.” PHEME PERKINS, *1 Corinthians* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 139–140.

²⁸ Contra Perkins: Rather than considering women to be defective or dangerous in some way, these covering instructions recognize the role of female prophets as analogous to priests who wear special undergarments (Exod 28:40–43), and the angels who perpetually praise YHWH in his presence (Isa 6:1–3).

²⁹ μηδὲ εἰδωλόατραι γίνεσθε καθὼς τινες αὐτῶν, ὡσπερ γέγραπται· ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πεῖν καὶ ἀνέστησαν παίζειν (1 Cor 10:7).

³⁰ καὶ ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πιεῖν καὶ ἀνέστησαν παίζειν (Exod 32:6b).

an image of a calf, ritual feasting, and sexual revelry.³¹ Paul also alludes to sexual dalliance with Midianite women, which led to idolatry (10:8; Num 25).

The generative capacity of food and YHWH's role as provider form the symbolic backdrop for these warnings. Just as YHWH provided food and water for Israelites in the wilderness (10:3–4), so the Corinthians are sustained by YHWH's provision, which includes the eucharistic bread and wine. All of the Corinthians as spiritual descendants of Israel ("our ancestors," 10:1) possess the spirit of YHWH,³² and therefore enjoy the privilege of communing with the deity by eating spiritual food and drinking spiritual drink. "Spiritual" (πνευματικὸν) does not refer to *material essence*, but rather to the *source* of the eucharistic food and drink.³³ According to Paul's warning: grumbling, committing sexual immorality, or eating the food of other deities would constitute rejection of YHWH's role as creator and provider (as the Israelites did in the wilderness).

1 Corinthians 9:3–14: Paul as Priest, Foregoing Rights to Tithes and Christian Marriage

1 Corinthians 9 may rightly be summarized as something like, "Christian liberty," or "Paul's defense of his apostleship." Yet the symbolic background of Paul's argument includes the rights of Israelite priests to eat from the sacrifices and tithes of worshippers, and the responsibility to take a wife.

Paul presents himself, the other apostles, and Barnabas as having some sort of a priest-like role in relation to the churches. Paul (along with Barnabas, apparently) had set aside his right to "eat of the tithes" of the community of YHWH to which he was entitled in his priest-like role (9:3–6, 13–14), for the sake of the gospel's advancement (cf Acts 18:1–4). In describing this decision, he uses images of eating and drinking, of *generation* and *cultivation*: drinking of the fruit of a vineyard, drinking milk from flocks (9:7), oxen treading grain (9:9), plowing, threshing, crops (9:10), sowing, reaping (9:11).

We may see Paul's decision to forego Christian marriage (ἀδελφὴν γυναῖκα περιάγειν, lit., "to go about with a sister wife") in a similar light: replacing one sort of "generation" with another. There is no evidence from the Hebrew Bible that Israelite priests were *obligated* to marry. However, marriage does appear to have been the norm (with the priest-prophet Jeremiah as an explicit exception; Jer 16:2), and we have seen that reproductive capacity is a requirement for the descendants of Aaron who serve as priests (Lev 21:13, 20; cf. Deut 23:1). A priest had a responsibility to produce more male³⁴ priests to serve YHWH and the people. For Paul, Christian marriage is an option that he chooses not to exercise in his priest-like role, because producing "spiritual offspring" (churches and converts) is more important to him.³⁵

1 Corinthians 8:1–13, 10:14–11:1, 11:17–34: Sacrifice-Eating as Participating in Demons or Christ

If there is indeed an organic connection between the motifs of ritual eating and ritual sex in these two passages from chapters 9 and 10, and if the first part of chapter 11 does pertain to the display of reproductive organs while performing a "priestly" function (i.e., prophesying), then we see the coherence of the entire section of chapters 8–11 and can make better sense of the apparently

³¹ While the semantic range of קָח* includes "laughter" (Gen 17:17) and "mockery" (Gen 21:9), it also includes the sort of "caressing/sporting" that caused Abimelech to doubt that Isaac and Rebekah were brother and sister (Gen 26:8)!

³² Paul says that "all" the Israelites were baptized in the Red Sea crossing (10:2) and were "all" nourished with divinely-sourced food and water (10:3–4). Sandwiched between two accounts of the people complaining over food (Num 11:1–24, 30–35) is the moment of widespread prophecy in the Israelite camp by the spirit of YHWH, during which Moses expresses his wish that *all* the people would be prophets (Num 11:29).

³³ Just as Paul will later contrast "spiritual" and "psychic"/natural bodies in 15:44–46.

³⁴ Paul's reimagining of the role and responsibilities of "priest" in the context of the church as being about "spiritual" generation and offspring resonates with the "new" understanding of headship, authority, generation, and female prophets that he articulates in 11:2–16.

³⁵ An idea anticipated in Isa 56:1–8, which states that eunuchs who "hold fast to [YHWH's] covenant" will receive "a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters."

disparate commands about eating idol meat. Paul understands that the generative and participatory aspects of food and sex are in background of the Corinthians' question about idol meat (as evidenced by his previous answers to their questions about marriage and sexuality in chapter 7). Though all foods are part of YHWH's good creation, Paul provides parameters based in the logic of the Jewish scriptures' teaching on the significance of eating with a deity, and the roles of priests and laity in the worship of YHWH.

The language of *generation*, including creation and edification/building-up/sustaining, runs through these passages on food and drink.³⁶ In the logic of ritual eating, accepting the hospitality of a deity in the form of food from the deity's table constitutes an acknowledgement of the deity as life-giver, both creator and sustainer, worthy of obeisance and offering. Paul uses the language of the *Shema* in 8:4–6 to identify “Jesus Christ” as the “Lord”—specifically in his capacity as creator and sustainer: “...one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him” (8:6b).³⁷ The members of the divine council—the “many so-called gods and lords” of 8:5—though they exist,³⁸ cannot claim equality with the Father as creator. In 10:14–22, knowingly eating food from their “tables” would be to acknowledge these rogue heavenly beings as creators and sustainers, rather than to acknowledge Christ as creator through participation in the Lord's Supper (and ongoing participation in both “tables” would be a rejection of YHWH as sole creator). In 10:26, Paul justifies eating food in ignorance of its consecrated status on the basis of Psalm 50:12, from a passage which downplays Elohim's need for sacrificial food (“If I were hungry I would not tell you...”) but emphasizes his role as creator and sustainer. Finally, in 11:17–34 the instructions for the Lord's Supper as a reenactment of Christ's sacrifice emphasize both spiritual provision (through solidifying the covenant relationship between YHWH and his people) and physical provision for the whole body through sharing a full meal—no one should go hungry (11:21, 33).³⁹

Conclusion: Anticipating Some Objections

[In my final section, I've anticipated some objections and tried to answer them, but I will stop here, and I'm eager to hear your thoughts on how I've tried to connect the dots here. Thank you!]

Let me now turn to some possible objections to this argument for coherence in 1 Corinthians 8–11 based on these motifs.

First, I acknowledge again the dependence of this line of argument on Troy Martin's understanding of περιβόλαιον in 11:15. The message of the head-coverings passage—among others—is forbidding the display of reproductive organs in worship, which I have connected to relevant passages in the Hebrew Bible and the allusions to sexual rites in 10:7–8. It is possible to connect other interpretations of Paul's obscure teaching to Greco-Roman ritual sexual practice—for

³⁶ Note the contrast between the roots οικοδομέω “to edify” (8:1, 10; 10:23); σύμφορος/συμφέρω “bring together/profit” (10:23, 33); and ἀσθενής/ἀσθενέω “(to be/become) weak” (8:7, 9–12; 11:30); ἀπόλλυμι “to destroy” (8:11; 10:9–10).

³⁷ “Paul takes the *Shema* itself, the central Jewish daily prayer and confession of monotheistic faith (‘YHWH our God, YHWH is one’), and gives the two words YHWH (*kyrios*) and ‘God’ (*theos*) different referents, so that *theos* refers to ‘the father, from whom are all things and we to him’ and *kyrios* refers to ‘Jesus the Messiah, through whom are all things and we through him.’” N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 571.

³⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Uncovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 331.

³⁹ See Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 30–33. “When the table of the Lord was shared at Corinth, other questions and problems from the wider world of dining were brought along. Those who could afford to bring food were clearly eating a substantial meal (1 Cor. 11:21). Paul uses the story of the Last Supper (vv. 23–25) not to give instructions for proper ritual or prayer, or to suggest consumption of mere crumbs and sips, but to shame a divided community at Corinth with the example of Jesus' humility and self-offering (vv. 27–30). We do not know what resulted in this case but should not assume that Paul's intention was to separate out a token form of eating or have such replace the communal meal. The bread and wine to be shared in his ideal banquet are still staple foods, shared fairly—not odd, merely ‘sacramental,’ additions to the meal” (31).

example, that pagan priestesses or ritual prostitutes would let their hair go uncovered or unbound⁴⁰; or, that the angels would be sexually tempted by free Christian women along the lines of the Enochic interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4⁴¹; or, possibly that a husband-wife tandem of prophets is somehow in view.⁴² While I am convinced of Martin’s argument, I think that the associations of unbound hair with pagan priestesses and prostitutes are also plausible, and would still perhaps constitute a weaker connection to ritual sexual practice than the one I have offered.

Second, I have operated from the premise that Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7–14 should exhibit some structure or coherence—but it could simply be that Paul is answering the Corinthians’ questions one-by-one without a particular order in mind. The catalyst for my investigation has been the lack of a new *περὶ δὲ* statement in 11:2, but Paul (or his scribe) may simply have neglected to indicate that he is answering their direct question about head coverings.⁴³ A third objection, related to the second, is that I may not have proven that it makes more sense to associate chapter 11 with chapters 8 through 10, rather than with chapters 12 to 14.

To these concerns, I would say that it does indeed seem that Paul is “going somewhere” with his answers to the Corinthians, beginning with questions about the goodness of marriage, the body and sex in chapter 7; then to food, sex and worship in the sections under discussion; and concluding with the great chapter on resurrection affirming the goodness of the created human body (chapter 15). It is fair to ask why the questions are addressed in the order they are, and why the head coverings section interrupts what would be a quite logical segue between 10:14–11:1 and 11:17–34 based on the Lord’s Supper. The *περὶ δὲ* statements do not require a rigid line between chapters 11 and 12; perhaps chapter 11 is a sort of “Janus” section that looks backward to chapters 8 to 10 in the ways that I suggest *and* forward to 12 to 14 as “Instructions for Public Worship.”

Nevertheless, I suggest that these dual motifs of ritual eating and sex provide a coherence to 1 Corinthians 8–11, and the fullness of both motifs should inform our readings of the discrete sections.

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⁴³ I am also leaving out any discussion of multiple editorial or authorial hands in the letter, because I do not think they bring us any further to understanding the structure of the received text.

Standard Outline 1 Corinthians 7–16	Section	Περὶ δὲ Introduction	Subject	
Marriage and Singleness	7:1–24	7:1	Instructions for marriage	
	7:25–40	7:25	Instructions for virgins	
Idol Meat and Christian Liberty			Ritual Eating or Drinking	Sexuality
	8:1–13	8:1	Eating sacrificial food as communing with non-gods	
	9:1–27		Apostles have priest-like rights to live off of sacrificial food, i.e., offerings of the churches	
			(Paul foregoes these rights, for the sake of witness and greater reward)	
	10:1–13		Israelites receiving “spiritual” food and drink (manna and water from the rock) in the wilderness; eating and drinking in the worship of the golden calf (Exod 32:6); grumbling about food in the wilderness (explicitly, Num 21:4–9; implicitly, Num 11; 16)	Sexual worship of the golden calf (10:7; Exod 32:6), and with the Midianite women and their gods (10:8; Num 25)
	10:14–22		Communing with Christ or with fallen divine council members through drinking and eating	
10:23–11:1		Eating idol meat in ignorance is acceptable; all creation belongs to the God of Israel, and if the generating/edifying capacity of food is attributed to YHWH alone (10:26; Ps 50:12), it is acceptable to eat.		
The Community Assembled for Worship	11:2–16			Women prophets serve in a priest-like role, mediating revelation. However, a woman’s long hair, as part of her reproductive system, should not be displayed in the worship of YHWH. ⁴⁴
	11:17–34		Instructions for the Eucharist	
	12:1–31a	12:1	Spiritual gifts	
	12:31b–13:13		On Love	
	14:1–40		Prophecy and tongues	
Resurrection	15:1–58		Resurrection	
Final Matters	16:1–24	16:1 16:12	Offerings and Church Relationships	

⁴⁴ Troy W. Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13–15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering,” *JBL* 123.1 (2004): 75–84.