THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2–16

AND APLLICATION FOR TODAY

**Introduction**

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is about the relationships between men and women, more specifically husbands and wives. Paul is practically applying his view of marriage to a worship setting. I will demonstrate this by focusing on verse 3 and arguing that *kephalē* (head) [[1]](#footnote-1) has the meaning of “authority over” someone and not the “source” of something in this context. Knowing the meaning of verse 3 is the key to understanding the passage and to applying it to today. Additionally, I will show this by considering other related verses in the Pauline corpus and the Bible at large. Next, I will examine some theological implications of interpreting *kephalē* as “source.” Finally, I will comment on the passage as a whole, focusing on some of the difficulties within the text, and will conclude with an application for today.

**Meaning of Head**

How one interprets the meaning of *head* in this verse changes the rest of the interpretation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Therefore, it is vital to consider whether the meaning is *source* or *authority over*. Some recent scholars, such as Stephen Bedale[[3]](#footnote-3) and Catherine Kroeger,[[4]](#footnote-4) have begun to argue for source as the meaning in this and other related passages.[[5]](#footnote-5) This interpretation seems especially plausible given verse 8 which states, “For man was not made from woman, but woman from man,” (ESV).[[6]](#footnote-6) The argument therefore, is that head in this metaphorical sense means source or origin. In the Greek *kephalē* can mean source, and typically means this when it is applied to rivers.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to Wayne Grudem, “Bedale [who is one of the main proponents of this interpretation and is often quoted by scholars who support this meaning] cites no evidence—no results of word studies, no lexical authorities—demonstrate his point.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Many scholars that argue for source as the meaning use Bedale’s work as evidence, but if his work has not sufficiently proven his case then we should disregard it and turn to other scholars who have taken on this task. One such scholar is Kroeger, who gives detailed examples of early church fathers and other Greek authors attempting to show that they interpreted head to mean *source*.[[9]](#footnote-9) After reviewing the evidence given[[10]](#footnote-10) for “source” and Grudem’s critique, it seems clear to me that the case is not strong enough to support *source* as a viable alternative meaning for *head*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Additionally, according to the *New Testament Greek–English Dictionary,* *source* is not listed as a possible meaning for *head*, but instead lists a symbol of authority or authority as possible meanings. This is not the only New Testament dictionary or lexicon that does not list *source* as a possible meaning, but does list *authority over* as a possible meaning. In fact all other standard dictionaries and lexicons list *authority over* as the best translation.[[12]](#footnote-12) With this evidence, to state that Paul’s audience would not have considered *head* to mean anything, but source is tenuous at best.[[13]](#footnote-13) On the contrary, it is more likely that Paul’s audience would have understood *authority over* to be the intended meaning.

The following are some examples, taken from Grudem’s article,[[14]](#footnote-14) of texts that demonstrate that *kephalē* means *authority ove*r and that Paul’s audience would have understood that as a possible meaning.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Judges 10:18: ‘“And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be *head* over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”’
2. Judges 11:9: “Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, ‘If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your *head*.”’
3. Psalm 18:43: David says to God, “You will make me the *head* of the Gentiles: a people whom I knew not served me.”
4. Philo *On Dreams* 2.207: ‘“*Head*’ we interpret allegorically to mean the ruling part of the soul.”
5. Plutarch *Pelopidas* 2.1.3: In an army, “the light–armed troops are like the hands, the cavalry like the feet, the line of men–at–arms itself like chest and breastplate, and the general is like the *head.*”

**Greater Context**

The greater context is one area that seems to be lacking from most of the scholarship on the understanding of the meaning of *kephalē*. However, it is certainly relevant to consider other Pauline[[16]](#footnote-16) and New Testament texts that comment on gender roles. Two of the most relevant texts are Ephesians 5:22–24[[17]](#footnote-17) which states, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands,” (ESV). Second, 1 Timothy 2:12–13 states, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve,” (ESV). In both of these texts it is obvious that Paul is talking about the authority of men over women. In Ephesians 5:22–24, Paul clearly shows that head is linked to the husband having authority over his wife. We see the same statement in 1 Corinthians 11:3 about men and Christ as a metaphorical head. Although, some have argued that Ephesians 5 “does not give a transcultural view of the husband’s authority,”[[18]](#footnote-18) one still must account for why Paul, the presumed author of both texts, would mean two different things when using the same phrase. Additionally, Paul uses the creation account in multiple places regarding male headship which seems to suggest a transcultural view. It is difficult to understand why Paul would mean two completely different things when he is talking about the same thing and using similar arguments—i.e. the creation account. 1Timothy 2:12–13 gives the creation account as the reason for the man’s authority; clearly showing that he believed the man’s authority to be given from the beginning and not just a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, to argue that the reason for Paul giving these commands was in order to keep with the cultural customs is an exegetical fallacy because this assumes to know Paul’s additional or ulterior motives. This is hard to believe given that Paul himself, tells us why he gives these commands. Speculating what his other reasons, if any, could have been does very little good. At the end of the day it all remains speculation.

**Theological Implications**

We cannot possibly consider changing the traditional[[19]](#footnote-19) interpretation of *head* from “authority over” to “source” without considering what the theological implications would be. It is no doubt true that Christ is our source for he created us,[[20]](#footnote-20) but does he not also have authority over us? One might argue that he is just the source of all authority and power, but this would be self–defeating, for how could he be the source of authority and not hold any authority over the power that originated in him. In case there is any doubt that Jesus has authority, let us consider what Jesus himself says in Matthew 28:18, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” (ESV). Therefore, the source view takes away Christ’s authority and reduces him to just a figurative source of humankind.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand how Christ can be subordinate to the Father and yet this is exactly the debate that the early church fathers had with the Arians. The Arians claimed that Christ was not part of the Godhead using by these verses to demonstrate that he was lesser than the Father.[[21]](#footnote-21) This fact furthers my argument regarding the meaning of *kephalē*.The early church fathers demonstrated that subordination does not mean inequality in deity by showing that the Son and the Father are of one substance. The reasoning that the heretics used then, is often used today when talking about male headship by egalitarians. A wife’s submission to her husband does not have to necessitate her to be inferior in being, much like Christ’s submission to the Father does not necessitate him being lesser than the Father in deity. It should concern us that scholars are quick to deny the authority of Christ in these verses in order to have a more favorable reading of these verses for women. Verse 3 is a statement about Christ first, and husbands and wives second, and we should be mindful of this as we begin to interpret the rest of the passage.

**Comments on 1 Corinthians 11:2–16**

Before giving my comments on the passage it is important that I note alternative interpretations of the passage as a whole. Some scholars, such as G.W. Trompf[[22]](#footnote-22) and William O. Walker,[[23]](#footnote-23) consider these verses to be an interpolation. However, Keener states, “…the textual evidence for this attempt is so weak that few scholars support it; most writers have concerned themselves instead with the more rigorous task of understanding the text.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Another interpretation considers the passage to be about homosexuality. Jerome Murphy–O’Connor is the main proponent of this view. He argues that long hair on men and short hair on women was associated with homosexuality. It would therefore be shameful for men and women to have these hairstyles.[[25]](#footnote-25) I do not disagree with this completely, for it is possible that these hairstyles were associated with homosexuality in the Greco–Roman culture. However, I do not believe this is the main point of the text because it does not adequately explain the passage as a whole, but focuses too much on verses 4–6 and verse 14. Yet, his work does contribute to a greater understanding of the cultural background against which Paul wrote.

As stated previously, I believe the main point of this passage to be an affirmation of gender roles and an application of these in the Greco–Roman context. The focus is primarily on the women who were taking advantage of their newfound freedom and were prophesying without head coverings. Gordon Fee postulates that this was probably, “related to their being *pneumatikos* (“spiritual”) and to their somewhat overrealized eschatology.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The idea is that women took Paul’s statements about neither be male or female and used them to deny any distinction in the present life. Most scholars[[27]](#footnote-27) agree with this perspective to some extent, in that they claim it is about the distinctions between the sexes, however they may disagree with me on gender roles. Of course, once again the difference between the views comes down to what meaning one attributes to *kephalē.*

One of the other major debates with regards to this text is about the head covering. There are three major views of what the covering is: (1) a literal piece of cloth (2) pinned up hair (3) and letting the hair down. The reason for the different interpretations comes from the text. For example, in verses 4–6 it seems quite clear that Paul is referring to a literal covering, but in verse 15 he refers to long hair as a natural covering. Additionally, we can identify at least three distinct customs at Corinth; Jewish, Roman, and Greek.[[28]](#footnote-28) According to Kroeger it was a custom for Jewish women to wear head coverings.[[29]](#footnote-29) In Roman religious cults, it is generally agreed that, head coverings were common for men and women during religious ceremonies.[[30]](#footnote-30) Evidence for Greek women, on the other hand, wearing head coverings is slim.[[31]](#footnote-31) With the mixture of all these cultural customs one is hard pressed to suggest which customs Paul would have been appealing to, if any. Some scholars have suggested that Paul was creating a uniquely Christian tradition.[[32]](#footnote-32) Whatever the case, head coverings were a part of the culture at that time in Corinth and Paul clearly believes wearing one symbolizes certain values.

With all of this in mind we can begin to dissect the different arguments for what head covering Paul had in mind. The argument for pinned up hair is argued for by Yeo Khiok–khng. He states, “ The only option open to us is that ‘having…on the head’ (v 4) refers not to hair–covering or to custom regarding veils, but most probably to hairstyle.”[[33]](#footnote-33) He comes to this conclusion because he does not believe Paul is imposing a Jewish custom upon the Corinthians and the text never uses the word veil. However, this argument is weakened when one considers that literal head coverings were commonplace at this time period and his audience could have easily interpreted head covering as a literal piece of cloth. Thus it seems most likely that the text supports a literal head covering or long hair interpretation over the wrapper or pinned up hair interpretation.

The argument for the long hair comes from translating the Greek in verse 4 as “having something hanging down from the head.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Murphy–O’Connor assets that “no Jew of the period would have entertained the notion that to pray with covered head was to obscure the image of God, or that it was in any way shameful.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Murphy–O’Connor claims he is “forced to adopt”[[36]](#footnote-36) this alternative because of verse 15 and this suggested evidence about Jewish thinking. However, it cannot be proven that Paul was writing to a strictly Jewish audience or that they would not entertain these notions. The Jews at Corinth were not just Jews, but Christians if Paul was writing to them, which would seem to indicate that they had adopted some, alternative ways of thinking about their traditional customs. Additionally, others argue that ἀντὶshould be translated as *instead* as opposed to *for*.[[37]](#footnote-37) This would render the verse; “*Instead*, her hair is given to her for a covering.” Although, this may be a legitimate translation, according to Lowery, “This view…does not explain the woman’s act of covering or uncovering her head, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:5–6.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The greater context in which the Greek is found has to be taken into consideration in order to find the best translation.

This leaves the literal head covering as the final, and most likely, interpretation of the covering that Paul is referring to. Head coverings, pieces of cloth, were common in that culture and it is more than plausible that the original audience would have understood Paul to be referring to a literal piece of cloth. Preston Massey argues that the “veil can serve the double function of reflecting the hair’s beauty while at the same time preserving a symbol of modesty.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Rather than the hair replacing the apparent literal covering (v 4–6), he convincingly argues that the literal head covering accentuates “the glory of her natural beauty without creating the social stigma of either immodesty or ostentatiousness.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Another major debate in this text occurs at verse 10, which states, “That is why *a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head*,[[41]](#footnote-41) because of the angels,”[[42]](#footnote-42) (ESV). The debate is centered at the translation of the verse in the Greek, particularly the italicized portion above. It is for this reason that we see alternative translations, even in the commonly used translations today. The NIV/NKJV translates the verse as follows; “…a woman ought to have authority over her own head….” This translation of *authority over* gives the indication that the authority does not belong to her in the context of the periscope and in particular verse 9. Scholars of the alternative view argue that the authority is *on her head* not *over*. The NRSV, states; “…woman to have a sign of authority on her head….” Both the NIV and NKJV more accurately reflect the Greek text since “a symbol” is not found in the Greek. However, despite these differences, all of these texts lend to the same interpretation; that the authority is not her own. The real debate centers on the authority being her own versus her husbands. These scholars translate the Greek to mean that she had authority on her head.[[43]](#footnote-43) One scholar who holds this view is Yeo Khiok–khng. He claims, “It is more likely that Paul argues for the right and freedom of women to maintain a feminine hairstyle as a symbol of gender uniqueness.”[[44]](#footnote-44) While this translation might be possible in the Greek, I believe given the context it is highly unlikely. Furthermore, this translation seems highly unlikely, given the overwhelming agreement of the translators of the latest versions of the Bible, even the NLT, that the authority referred to is not her own. Here, it becomes evident how the meaning assigned to *kephalē* changes the interpretation of the rest of the text. I believe that the ESV is the best translation because it accounts for the most likely meaning of *kephalē* and clarifies what Paul implies—there being a symbol of authority over her head. Furthermore, because verse 3 is about marriage relations and the authority that husbands have, it is most logical to translate the Greek word *gynē* as wife instead of woman.

Although, this is a passage distinguishing the gender roles within a marriage and assigning authority to the husband, as with other passages on marriage,[[45]](#footnote-45) we see Paul bring balance in this passage. Verses 11–12 demonstrate to the men that they are dependent upon women and suggest they should treat women with respect and love. They appear here, so that, men might not become proud and think of themselves more highly than they ought.

**Application For Today**

After considering many alternative views for the various translations and interpretations of the verses in this passage, one meaning stands out above the rest. As previously stated, Paul’s primary concern here is the marriage relationship while his secondary consideration is the proper application of the gender roles within a worship setting. This view has the least amount of inconsistencies and makes the text more coherent as a whole. Although, I believe the covering to be a literal one, I believe interpreting it to be long hair is also a viable interpretation. It is important to note however, that this interpretation does not change the meaning of the entire passage. The meaning of the passage centers around the meaning of *kephalē*, which has yet to be sufficiently proven to mean source.

The application for today is found in the overarching theme of the passage and not in the practical application of the theme for the men and women in Paul’s day. Wives should not be required to wear head coverings today because it is no longer a symbol of authority, necessarily an indication of modesty,[[46]](#footnote-46) or a way to distinguish between the sexes. One is hard pressed to find many scholars who will support a literal application of this verse for women today. Those who do, fail to take into account that wearing head coverings was not a disgrace for women in Corinth as it would be for us today. Moreover, we can look to the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:23–24) as an example where many do not adhere to the literal application of the verse. Instead, many churches opt for using juice over wine to symbolize the blood of Christ.[[47]](#footnote-47) The point is not practical adherence but symbolic adherence to the text, in these cases.

This does raise the question, “What is a good symbol of authority for women to use today?” Some might suggest wedding rings, but this does not distinguish a woman from a man since men also wear wedding rings. The best answer seems to be modest dress because some scholars suggest that it is part of the context of the original passage. Of course, how one defines modesty is dependent upon where one lives and thus, varies from place to place. Unfortunately, there have not been very many good suggestions because the overwhelming majority fail to recognize the truth so clearly taught in these verses.[[48]](#footnote-48) Although, it may be difficult to find an appropriate symbol for today, the church can still look to this passage for instruction on marriage.

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1. The meaning of this word is at the heart of the complementarian/egalitarian debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I will demonstrate this more fully as my argument progresses. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3Stephen Bedale, as cited in Wayne Grudem, “Does kephalē ("head") mean "source" or "authority over" in Greek literature? A survey of 2,336 examples.” *TJ* 6, no. 1 (March 1985): 38–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Catherine Kroeger as cited in Wayne Grudem, “The meaning of kephalē ("head"): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged.,” *JETS* 44, no. 1 (March 2001): 25–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Other scholars include Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 503; F.F. Bruce as cited in Wayne Grudem,” “Does kephalē ("head") mean "source" or "authority over" in Greek literature?” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I primarily use the ESV because it is newer, and therefore has taken more recent discoveries into account, and is essentially literal. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Grudem, “Does kephalē ("head") mean "source" or "authority over" in Greek literature?” 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid.,41. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kroeger as cited by Wayne Grudem, “The meaning of kephalē ("head"),”25–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Much of the evidence that Kroeger gives leaves out key sections of text that qualifies what the Chruch Fathers and Greek authors thought the meaning of kephalē was. Additionally, she does not address the texts where the Church fathers directly address the passages where the meaning of kephalē " is disputed. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Other scholars who agree include, David W. J. Gill, 1 & 2 Corinthians (ZIBBC; Grand Rapids, MI:Zondervan, 2002), 58; David K. Lowery, “The Head Covering and the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:3–34,” *BibSac* 143, no. 570 (April 1986): 157; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, (2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 156;J.W. Roberts, The veils in 1 Cor 11:2–16,” *ResQ* 3, no. 4 (1959): 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wayne Grudem, “Does kephalē ("head") mean "source" or "authority over" in Greek literature?” 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 503. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wayne Grudem, “Does kephalē ("head") mean "source" or "authority over" in Greek literature?” 54–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Old Testament scriptures are relevant because this was the Bible of the early church. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Although the authorship of the following texts is debated, I am assuming Paul to be the author. Even so, these texts were written close to the time of the first letter to the Corinthians and are included in the canon, which I believed to be inspired, so they are still relevant to understanding 1 Cor 11:2–16. Believing that someone else authored these texts weaken my argument some, but does not disprove my argument as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The meaning of head in this text is disputed as well. However, arguments in favor of source as the meaning depend largely on interpreting head to mean source in 1 Cor 11:3, because submission is so closely connected to authority. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Craig Keener, “Paul and Women’s Head Coverings.,” in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament,* 1105. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Wayne Grudem, “The meaning of kephalē ("head")”, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. John 1:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Wayne Grudem, “The meaning of kephalē ("head")”, 26–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. G.W. Trompf, “On Attitudes toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature: 1 Corinthians 11: 3–16 and Its Context,” *CBQ* 42, no. 2 (1980): 196–215. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and Paul's Views Regarding Women," *JBL* 94, no. 1 (March 1, 1975): 94–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Keener, “Paul and Women’s Head Coverings.,” 1104. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Jerome Murhpy–O’Connor, “1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Once Again,” *CBQ* 50, no. 2 (April 1988): 265–274. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 498.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* 505; Mark Finney, “Honour, Head–coverings and Headship: 1 Corintians 11.2–16 in its Social context,” *JSNT* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. J.W. Roberts, The veils in 1 Cor. 11:2–16,” Restoration Quarterly 3, no. 4 (1959): 188–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Keener, “Paul and Women’s Head Coverings.,” 1104. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. David W. J. Gill, 1 & 2 Corinthians (ZIBBC; Grand Rapids, MI:Zondervan, 2002), 58–59. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “Paul and Women’s Head Coverings.,” 1104 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Mark Finney, “Honour, Head–coverings and Headship”, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Yeo, Khiok–Khng, "Differentiation and Mutuality of Male–Female Relations in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," *BR* 43, (January 1, 1998): 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jerome Murhpy–O’Connor, “1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Once Again,” 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. David K. Lowery, “The Head Covering and the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:3–34,” *BiBSac* 143, no. 570 (April 1, 1986): 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Preston Massey, “Long Hair as a Glory and as a Covering Removing an Ambiguity from 1 Cor 11:15,” *NovT* 53, no. 1 (January 2011): 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 72. F.F. Bruce, also contends for a literal head covering, as cited in Preston Massey, “Long Hair as a Glory and as a Covering Removing an Ambiguity from 1 Cor 11:15,” 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Italics are my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For reasons of space I will not address what, “because of the angels” means. Most scholars agree that we cannot know what Paul meant by this. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. J.W. Roberts, The veils in 1 Cor. 11:2–16,” *RQ* 3, no. 4 (1959): 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Yeo, Khiok–Khng, "Differentiation and Mutuality of Male–Female Relations in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," *BR* 43, (January 1, 1998): 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Ephesians 5:25–33; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. There is a slight association of modesty with head coverings for us today. However, head coverings are not the pinnacle of modesty for American women today. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. “What is the Head Covering in 1 Cor 11:2–16 and Does it Apply to Us Today?”, Daniel Wallace, Bible.Org, accessed 23 October 2013, https://bible.org/article/what–head–covering–1–cor–112–16–and–does–it–apply–us–today [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Instead, the passage is made to be about women’s rights rather than the marriage relationship. While I do think this passage is relevant to the role of women in the church and provides insight into what women should be allowed to do, I do not think that this is the primary purpose of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)