



Paul and Corinthian Women's Hairstyles

by Nancy A. Carter*

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Paul discusses [head coverings](#) and hairstyles for female and male prophets in ([1 Corinthians 11:2-6](#)). Let's look at the archaeological evidence for women's hairstyles worn in Paul's day as an aid to understanding his comments about the Corinthian women prophets in particular.

Most of the art that survives of Greco-Roman women who lived around the time of Paul is of upper class women. Hairstyles may have differed according to class and status.



Detail of relief on large family tomb monument from Neumagen depicting four female slaves dressing wife's hair Trier, Landesmuseum. Credit: Barbara McManus, 1988

In general, Greco-Roman women wore their long hair up. They let their hair down in certain public contexts, including times of mourning, weddings, and some religious rites.

Greco-Roman women used hairpins, several inches long, to fasten up their hair. The designs of hairpins varied from very plain to fancily carved or



This woman is wearing a basic hairstyle worn in the Roman Empire in the first century. Long hair was parted in the middle and wound into a knot called a chignon in the back of the head.

Munich, Glyptoteck. Credit: Barbara McManus, 1988, c. 90-100 CE



Roman silver and ivory hairpins with sculpted tops and ivory hairpin box with relief carving of satyr and maenad. Satyrs were companions of Dionysus.

Cologne, Romisch-Germanisches Museum. Credits: Barbara McManus, 1988

lathed. Hairpins could be made of inexpensive bone or more expensive material, such as silver or ivory.

Some scholars believe that Paul asked the Corinthian women prophets to pin up their hair, rather than wear head coverings (veils). ([Read an alternate translation of 1 Corinthians 11.](#)) When the women prophets participated in [ecstatic prayer and prophecy](#) during Christian worship, they apparently let their hair down.

The practice of women letting their hair flow loose and uncovered was associated with ecstatic rituals in a number of non-Christian religious associations (religious communities). For example, when worshiping Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, women let the hair down like the [mythic Maenads](#).¹ Maenads (or Bacchae) were female worshipers of Dionysus depicted in myth as madwomen. (The English word "maniac" has roots similar to "Maenad" in Latin and Greek).

Corinth was a major center for [Isis](#) (see *sculpture below*); possibly some of the women prophets of the church had once worshiped her. Certainly they were familiar with this religion, which was popular, especially among women. Isis was a mother goddess who, with her husband Osiris and son Horus, formed a trinity. Her religion included theology of death, mourning, and resurrection connected with a mythic story about Isis' search for the fourteen body parts of her murdered husband Osiris, who then was restored to life.²

"Archeological evidence also shows that female devotees of Isis usually wore long hair 'with a band around the forehead and curls falling on the shoulder,' while male initiates had their hair shaven."³ Isis was said to have made women's power equal to men's. Like Christianity her communities of worship (called "associations") admitted both women and slaves to equal membership. When the women prophets in the Corinth wore their hair down it may have symbolized to them equality of status with the male prophets.⁴

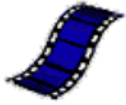


Paul did not want the Gentile Christian female prophets wearing unrestrained hair. One reason may have been that from a traditional Jewish Christian view, loose hair was a sign of uncleanness. Proper Jewish women braided their hair and pinned it up. Paul was being sarcastic when he wrote, "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled [or uncovered with bound up hair] disgraces her head it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved," He was arguing that Christian women wearing their hair down like female ecstasies of other religions was as disgraceful as shaving their head like a man.⁵

Scholars propose a variety of motivations and interpretations for Paul's words. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests he was concerned that the women prophets were giving the "impression of madness and frenzy so typical of orgiastic cultic worship" and they must therefore project a more proper image with restrained hairstyles. Paul's intent was "not reenforcement of gender differences" but rather he was concerned with "the order and missionary character of the worship community."⁶ Antoinette Clark Wire believes that conflict between Paul and the women prophets was a complex one that involved power dynamics related to social status, gender expectations, and interpretation of the early Christian baptismal formula:

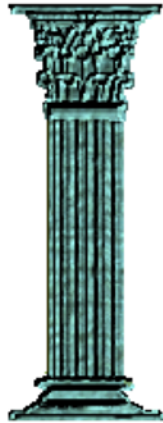
Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus-- Galatians 3:25-28.

"Paul and the Corinthians had different interpretations of the several traditions in which this confession is made: God's resurrection of the crucified Christ, God's new creation of the believer in Christ, and the spirit of God working in those who believe."⁷



Watch the [online video](#) for this study. Included is background given by the [Rev. Dr. Judith A. Stevens](#) on Corinthians 11 and women's hairstyles.

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--Background and Pictures



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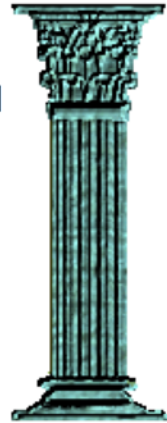
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Notes and Credits

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The pictures are adapted from photos taken by [Barbara F. McManus](#), The College of New Rochelle, bmcmanus@cnr.edu. They are resources from the [VRoma Project](#). The one of Isis from Vroma courtesy of AICT. Click on the colorized photo to see original version. See also: [Roman Clothing: Women](#) on the VRoma web site.

¹Cynthia L. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *Biblical Archeologist*, June 1988, p. 112.

² Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 71-73.

³Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 227.

⁴Fiorenza, pp. 226-228.

⁵Fiorenza, pp. 226-228.

⁶Fiorenza, p. 230.

⁷Antionette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 220. She gives an overview of recent scholarly interpretations about Paul's meaning in pp. 220-223.

Disclaimer: Some [links](#) jump to outside sites for further information on Corinthians, the Bible, Paul, and other resources. Links do not constitute an endorsement by the Women's Division of the information on other web sites. External web sites offer us diverse perspectives; afford us an opportunity to compare them to United Methodist positions; and, encourage us to critically analyze the issues raised by the [Corinthians](#) web pages.

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