Paul on the Subject of Women

Jesus didn't speak about women, except in his parables. He did, however, speak about people – about human beings of all sizes. And he did speak to women and engaged with them on a person-to-person level. He lived and worked with them. They travelled about with him. He suffered and died in their presence. They had been the first witnesses of his new presence among his followers. His life as told in the Gospels speaks of his attitudes towards women and the values by which he lived.

Paul, on the other hand, did occasionally address the subject of women in his letters. And from the available evidence his missionary relationship with female co-workers and what he wrote on the subject of women was somewhat at odds. While he conducted his life in their company, and while he welcomed their contribution to the growth of the movement and paid tribute to them, he was anxious to ensure that they complied with at least some of the culturally determined customs of the day. Paul regarded himself as a bachelor. A man of the world who had been brought up and educated at the interface of the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds.

When Paul raised the subject of women, as he did in a number of places and from a variety of angles, his observations were pastoral rather than theoretical, argumentative rather than reflective. He trotted out his ideas to defend a practical, pastoral position. His remarks seem to have arisen spontaneously and witness to his ingrained belief-system, to unreflected attitudes and prejudices hidden underneath his thought-patterns and which were tempering his pastoral theology and practices.

Paul and the other apostles and community leaders seem to have quickly and unconsciously fallen back into the cultural groove of the day. They appear to have embodied, without any resistance or reflection, the attitudes and prejudices generally accepted in the society where they were ministering and where they had grown up.

Women as Witnesses to the Resurrection

Three of the four canonical Gospels provide evidence of the central role women played in the resurrection events. According to the authors of the Matthew and John Gospels, women were present as the first witnesses to the new reality of a Risen Lord.

> So they (Mary Magdalene and the other Mary) departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold Jesus met them and said, 'Hail!' And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. (Matt 28:8–10).

With the Gospel of John this same women-first tradition burst into bloom when the author gave Mary Magdalene the principal role in his post-resurrection narrative. The details of the involvement of women as recorded by the author of the Luke Gospel are somewhat different. According to him, the women did not encounter Jesus risen. They received a message from 'two men in dazzling apparel' who told them that Jesus was not to be found among the dead, but that he had risen. They were invited to deliver a message to the eleven apostles and 'to all the rest'. As the author of Luke reported, the women told their story to the apostles, but the men thought they were speaking nonsense. This story of the women's involvement was repeated (with a few variations) by two disciples to the stranger on the road to Emmaus.

> Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see' (Luke 24:22–24).

The authors of three of the canonical Gospels are witnesses to the fact that women were seen by the early church as true exemplars of the faith, as messengers of the Good News and credible witnesses to extraordinary events.

Even before the Gospels appeared on the scene, however, Paul had dealt with the resurrection event and its significance. He had identified a series of witnesses to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances as proof of the extraordinary claim of the apostles that Jesus had in fact conquered the terrors of death. But in the series of mysterious encounters he listed he made no reference to women, though they may have been included, anonymously, among the five hundred he mentioned.

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ … appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

Paul is silent about the presence of women in Jesus' life and on Calvary, and about their special role in recognising his new presence among his followers after the resurrection.

Yet within a decade or two, three of the four Gospels were prioritising women in this wildly significant event. In the face of what was recorded later by the Gospel authors, Paul's omission screams out for some explanation. Where are the women in Paul's summary of the resurrection witnesses? Where is Mary Magdalene,

and the others? Did he not know that stories were abroad that women were there on the scene to witness the mystery of their Lord's presence and to receive and transmit a message from two mysterious men on guard at the empty tomb?

As a Pharisee trained in the school of Gamaliel (and like the other apostles in the story), did he also refuse to place any persuasive value on the evidence which a woman could give? Or did he presume his readers in Corinth would not value their evidence, or that they would be put off by their presence?

Paul claimed he was delivering to his readers what he had received. Had the apostles failed to tell him about Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the others, and if so, why?

Or had the whole institution become male dominated? Were men feeling threatened and sensing the need to assert their top-dog status within the institution?

Or did Paul decide not to give the female members of the community any further reason to inflate their status and demand a greater share of the action? Were women on the move in the Jesus movement and ready to assert their importance? Perhaps they were already rowdy and rebellious enough. From this distance Paul's silence on the subject is deafening.

Immediately after his conversion, Paul had spent a few days with the disciples, including Ananias, in Damascus. Later he had travelled to Jerusalem for instruction in the faith and stayed with Peter for fifteen days. He had met with James the son of Alphaeus, perhaps also with Barnabas. It is beyond belief that his apostolic contacts had not filled him in on some of the critical details of what he came to believe was the principal event in Jesus' life. He had been told of Jesus' appearance to Peter, whom he mentioned first, to the twelve (though there were only eleven by that stage), to James, to 'all the apostles' (presumably a larger group than 'the twelve') and surprisingly, to five hundred or more of his followers – and yet he omitted any reference to Jesus' women, to Mary Magdalene and the others.

The leaders in Jerusalem may have been reluctant to accept that women had played such an important role in Jesus' life and mission. They may have wanted the community's attention to be focused on male authority to avoid their power being dissipated or disrespected. Who had the authority and the basis for its exercise had become a point of tension in the primitive communities. Was Peter in charge or one of others? Perhaps James, the brother of Jesus? Did the tension lie between Peter and Paul? There was some bitter rivalry between Paul and other preachers who were interfering in his pastoral bailiwick. Was one man in charge or a committee of apostles and elders? Did the power rest with those members with special gifts (prophets and prophetesses, for example) or with the apostles and their successors? Perhaps there was an audible level of tension between the male leaders and the women. Inject powerful women like Mary Magdalene into the mix and the result would have been chaos.

Maybe we can also look to Paul's audience to partly explain his silence. He was writing to his church in Corinth where female participation in the life and worship of the community had perhaps become a problem. Women misbehaving, causing trouble. He could hardly tell them how important they had been in spreading the news of the resurrection and then tell them that they had to be silent in the liturgical gatherings, that they were second-class members with a status inferior to their menfolk.

Maybe the women in the early church had taken to Jesus in a big way and had frightened the male members. The spontaneous outbursts of raw enthusiasm and excessive devotion had to be tamed by rules and prohibitions. Women had to be put back into their customary places. In the face of disputes and power struggles, the leaders had worked hard to keep the peace, to remain in control, to keep women 'pregnant and in the kitchen'.

New converts from far and near were joining the ranks. We can safely assume that there was a dramatic increase in the

numbers of those who were reluctant to accept women into positions of power, people who had grown up in a patriarchal culture, members who had crossed over from Judaism and those who came from the Greco-Roman world. These 'players' were all educated to be suspicious of women leading prayer groups, prophesying, joining in the discussions and challenging their male counterparts. After all, these new converts had not met Jesus, or heard him preach. Involving women in the life of the community and establishing their roles had become a difficult message to sell. Perhaps, to add to the problem, Paul may not have been a supporter of Jesus' radical feminist policy and was reluctant to promote it. The converts from Asia Minor had retained their cultural prejudices about the presence of women in public places. They believed their place was in the home and female misbehaviour in the mystery cults throughout the region only reinforced the stereotypes.

Finally, in his theological mind Paul linked the fact of witnessing Jesus' resurrection appearances with membership of the college of apostles, and with being able to exercise authority within the community. In accordance with the Jewish law that was well-known to any Pharisee, men were the appropriate and credible witnesses, not women. Women were not part of the specially selected band of apostles. Men, and only men, had constituted the seventy members of the Jewish Sanhedrin. In the society at large where Paul was preaching and establishing his communities, men were in charge. The future of the churches could not be assured if women were seen to be dominant and if the role of women in the resurrection of Jesus was made public. The women's involvement was an uncomfortable historical fact. Any reference to them could only cause further trouble – maybe undermine the emerging power-structures within the community and alienate those who otherwise were showing interest in applying for membership.

Whatever the explanation, the omission of Jesus' female friends from the resurrection narrative would not enhance Paul's reputation as a promoter of women within his organisation.

A Man of Traditional, Conservative Values

In 315 BC, Cassander of Macedon established the colony of Thessaloniki and called the city after his wife, the half-sister of Alexander the Great and the daughter of Phillip II.

In about 50 AD citizen Paul and his travelling companions established a Christian presence in this bustling metropolis on the border of the Aegean Sea. In the winter of that year, after he had left them for Corinth and Athens, Paul sat down to write a letter to his 'brothers' there.

During his stay in the city, Paul had confronted a number of problems. He had been told by the community leaders, for example, that some of the male members were continuing to live the lives they had enjoyed before, as pagans. Fornication had been a popular recreational past-time and the social norms of the time tended to turn a blind eye to such activity. In towns like Thessaloniki or Corinth at the time when Paul was walking the land and preaching, premarital sex, adulterous activities and visitations to brothels were considered minor offences for warm-blooded males.

While the elder Cato had expressly justified fornication (Horace, Sat. i. 2), Cicero was only prepared to argue the case for leaving men, especially young men, free to 'sow their oats' as being negligible. In his defence of Marcus Caelius Rufus, Marcus Tullius Cicero proclaimed in a speech delivered on 4 April 56 BC that:

> Anyone who thought young men ought to be forbidden to visit prostitutes would certainly be the virtuous of the virtuous, that I cannot deny. But he would be out of step not only with this

> easy-going age but also our ancestors, who customarily made youth that concession. Was there ever a time when this was not habitual practice, when it was censured and not permitted, in short when what is allowable was not allowed? … Imagine a woman with no husband who turns her house into a house of assignation, openly behaves like a harlot, entertains at her table men who are perfect strangers, and does all this in town, in her suburban places, and in the crowded vacation land around Baiae; in fine, imagine that her walk, her way of dressing, the company she keeps, her burning glances, her free speech, to say nothing of her embraces and kisses or her capers at beach-parties and banquets and yachting-parties, are all so suggestive that she seems not merely a whore but a particularly shameless and forward specimen of the profession. Well, if a young man had some desultory relations with her, would you call him an adulterer, Lucius Herennius, or simply a lover? Would you say he was laying siege to her innocence, or simply gratifying her lust? (*Pro Caelio*, ch. 48-49).

The sexual morality among the young men of the colony was lax and Paul considered this to be a barrier to the holiness and honour to which God had invited them.

> What God wants is for you all to be holy – that each of you keep away from fornication; that each of you (*ekaston humou*) know how (*eidenai*) to acquire (*ktasthai*) a wife (*skeuos*) in a way that is holy and honourable, not giving way to the passion of lust like the pagans who do not know God; that no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord always punishes sins of this sort, as we solemnly forewarned you (1 Thess 4:4–8).

These few verses in Paul's letter, in its original Greek, have proved difficult for scholars and exegetes to unravel and render intelligible in English, or for that matter, for the great scriptural

scholar to translate into his Vulgar Latin. So, in an attempt to capture the true meaning of Paul's words we need to make some basic observations on a few of the critical Greek words he used.

The Greek word *eidenai*, in its perfect, active infinitive form, is best translated into English as 'to know how to do something', 'to have the ability to do something'. So the sentence would read, 'each of you (men) must learn or know how to get a *skeuos* of your own', or literally, 'every one of you men should know how to acquire his own vessel (his *skeuos*)'.

The words *ekaston humou*, being in the masculine form, mean 'everyone of you men', and while some commentators consider that women were included by implication in the masculine gender pronoun, this is not at all clear. Paul was in the habit of addressing himself to his 'brothers' in Thessaloniki and elsewhere. He wrote to the male members of his local communities – after all, they were the ones in charge and the unreflective recipients of Paul's message.

In the passage, the Greek word *ktasthai* appears in the present middle infinitive form of the verb *ktaomai*. It should not be translated as 'to possess' or 'to own', but rather 'to gain possession of', 'to acquire', 'to procure' or 'to purchase'. This word was used in the same way in relation to marriage in the Greek or Septuagint version of the Jewish Bible (Ruth 4:10; Sir 36:24, Xenophon, *Symp*. ii. 10).

But it's the word *skeuos* which has caused the most controversy among the experts and exegetes. In a literal sense, it means 'container' — 'a receptacle for containing something' — or 'utensil' or 'instrument'. It was used to refer to kitchen utensils, to the impedimenta or accoutrements of war, or to the tackle associated with ships such as sails and ropes. Some English translations render the Greek word in its literal meaning as 'vessel'. But it can also carry several metaphorical or figurative meanings. A few scholars have suggested that it might best be seen as a euphemism for the *membrum virile* or the male genitalia, as King David was reported as using it in 1 Samuel 21:4–5.

In the proper context the Greek word could mean 'body' in the sense of the container of the soul. The human body, for example, could be described as a vessel in which the soul would reside for a time. However, when the word was used as a metaphor in this sense, the figurative meaning always seems to have been made explicit in the context. In other words, it was not used to signify 'the body' unless it is presented in an explanatory context – a vessel fashioned by a potter from clay or the earth.

To avoid the difficulty this Greek word presents, many modern English translations of this New Testament passage have been content to translate the word into its pure literal meaning, 'vessel'. Other translators, however, have attempted to capture Paul's real meaning. The Catholic edition of the *Revised Standard Version*, the *English Standard Version*, the *New International Version*, the *Jerusalem Bible*, and the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989), for example, have all followed the lead of John Chrysostom, Theodoret, John Damascene, Tertullian, Pelagius, Calvin and others by rendering the meaning of the Greek word *skeuos* as 'body'. The original *Revised Standard Version*, *The Good News Translation* and the *Contemporary English Version* follow people like Augustine, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Thomas Aquinas, Zwingli and others by translating the word as a metaphor for wife or a man's sexual partner. It points to a man's vessel for begetting children or his container into which he would insert his 'member'.

It was common in the Jewish culture for a man's wife to be referred to as 'a vessel'. The anonymous author of the first epistle of Peter used the same image and the same figure of speech to refer to a wife, describing her (significantly) as the 'weaker vessel':

> You wives, be submissive to your husbands ... Likewise you husbands must always treat your wives with consideration in your life together, respecting a woman as one who, though she

> may be the weaker vessel, is equally an heir to the life of grace (1 Peter 3:1–7).

This figurative use of the Greek *skeuos* to mean a man's wife is supported in several passages in the Babylonian Talmud.

The rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah records an incident involving a feast for King Ahasuerus. The men who were present began to discuss which women were the most beautiful – the Median or the Persian women.

> Ahasuerus said to them: the vessel that I use, i.e., my wife, is neither Median nor Persian, but rather Chaldean. Do you wish to see her? They said to him: Yes, provided that she be naked, for we wish to see her without any additional adornment (*Seder Moed Migillah*, Daf 12b:3)

And another example appears in the *Zohar* which was at the basis of the literature of Jewish mysticism:

> Therefore whosoever asks God, how can he fix upon a good vessel (as a wife) for this man. For whoever discharges his seed into an unsuitable vessel (*in vas non bonum*), that man fouls and dishonours his seed (*Sohar Levit*, Fol. 38, col. 152).

The *Mishnah Ketubot* was composed in Israel in the late second century and early third century of this era and is part of a treatise called the *Nashim* which deals with women. In stating the law on rape which obliged a man to marry his victim, the author of the *Ketubot* employed the metaphor of a vessel to signify his victim's genitalia and to speak of her as his wife.

> One who seduces a virgin pays for three things, and one who rapes her pays four. The seducer pays for her disgrace, deterioration in value, and for the fine. A rapist adds payment for the bodily pain he inflicted upon her. What is the difference between the punishment of the seducer and that of the rapist?

> The rapist pays for the bodily pain; and the seducer does not pay for this pain. The rapist pays immediately, and the seducer only when he sends her away (i.e. refuses to marry her). The rapist must drink out of his chosen vessel (i.e. he must marry his victim) and may never divorce her, whereas the seducer may send her away.
>
> How far does the saying 'he must drink out of his chosen vessel' extend? Even if she is lame, even if she is blind, and even if she is afflicted with boils? However, if unchaste behaviour is discovered in her, or she is not qualified to enter by marriage into the Jewish people, he is not permitted to maintain her as a wife, and it is said, 'Unto him she shall be a wife', a wife who is fitting for him (*Mishnah Ketubot*, ch. 3, sects. 4 and 5).

Finally, the Talmudic *Tractate Sanhedrin* recorded a saying of a Rabbi Samuel who was speaking in the name of a renowned commentator on the oral law, a rabbi named Abba Arikha who had lived in the late second to early third century of this era and who was referred to as Rab or Rav:

> R. Samuel b. Unya said in the name of Rab: 'An unmarried woman is an unfinished vessel, and she makes a covenant with (or cares for) no-one except him who made her a vessel; as it is said (Isa 54:5) – For now your creator will be your husband [in the Hebrew text – 'your possessor'] [or 'the one who deflowers you is the one who creates you'] – Yahweh Sabaoth is his name' (*Tractate Sanhedrin*, ch. 2).

The rabbinic saying described a single woman as 'an unfinished vessel' or as it appears in another translation, 'a shapeless lump' simply because she was not married. A spinster is transformed into a 'vessel', however, by her husband who thereby becomes her creator or her owner by the act of deflowering her.

In describing a married woman as the vessel of her husband and presenting her as the antidote to a man's natural urges, Paul was simply following a Jewish figure of speech. And at least some of the early Christian writers understood this. Augustine of Hippo had had no doubt that in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul had been addressing his 'brothers', the male members of the local community, and that he had been using the common Greek word for vessel or utensil as a metaphor for a man's wife.

> This disease of concupiscence is what the apostle refers to, when, speaking to married believers, he says: This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; not in the disease of desire, even as the Gentiles which know not God (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). The married believer, therefore, must not only not use another man's vessel, which is what they do who lust after others' wives; but he must know that even his own vessel is not to be possessed in the disease of carnal concupiscence (*On Marriage and Concupiscence*, book 1, ch. 9)

Being a citizen of Rome who spoke Greek, and someone educated in one of the best Pharisee schools of higher learning, Paul was familiar with the Greek or Septuagint version of the Bible and sometimes quoted from it. Though the Wisdom of Ben Sira (also known by its Latin title Ecclesiasticus) did not find a way into the official Hebrew canon of the Jewish Bible, it was often quoted in the rabbinical writings as well as by authors whose writings appear in the New Testament. This piece of wisdom literature appears to have been widely circulated during the intertestamental period – copies have been found in Cairo, at Qumran and Masada. One of its dominant themes – the beauty and wonders of creation – can be seen in a poem in praise of the acts of God in the world of nature (Sir 42:15-43:33). The author also believed that one could gain wisdom from a close

observation of the natural world – a theme which appears in wider Jewish thought at the time and which can also be seen in some of Paul's writings (e.g. Rom 1:19–20 and 1 Cor11:14).

Ben Sira had been a scribe dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom and reverence for the Law, the Torah. He was a teacher of wealthy young men and his words of wisdom and advice (mainly to an audience of young men) had been translated by his grandson from its original Hebrew into Greek. Later, his translation became part of the Greek Bible known as the Septuagint. Some scholars have concluded that the material was used to train young Jewish men for positions of leadership.

Ben Sira's book of Sirach was read in ancient synagogue services and early church meetings. It reflects Jewish beliefs and societal values in Palestine just prior to the Maccabean revolt (167-64 BC) when the society was highly polarized between rich and poor, powerful and weak, male and female, the pious and the non-observant, and between Jew and Gentile. Judaism was gradually becoming more and more focused on the Mosaic Law and this law would become the central characteristic of Judaism after the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed.

While in his writings Ben Sira personified wisdom as a virtuous woman to be earnestly sought (4:14–15), he seems to have had a profound distrust for women in general.

At the beginning of Chapter 9, the author returned to providing advice about women. This was a topic that attracted his attention more than the other authors and composers of the wisdom books. He urged his reader not to let a woman, any woman, a wife, a harlot, a singer, get a hold on him. She would dominate him if he gave her the upper hand by surrendering to her without restraint. If she could keep her cool while he was almost off his head with passion, she could control him. Fornication was a problem in places other than Thessaloniki.

> Do not look intently at a virgin, lest you stumble and incur penalties for her. Do not give yourselves to harlots, lest you lose your inheritance. Turn away your eyes from a shapely woman, and do not look intently at beauty belonging to another. Never dine with another man's wife nor revel with her at wine (Sirach 9:1–9).

The Book of Proverbs is another Jewish collection of wise sayings and aphorisms, supposedly utterances of famous people such as Solomon, Agur and Lemuel. In the opening few chapters a father is seen to be giving his son lessons on how to behave.

Chapter 5 is part of those father–son lessons and addresses the subject of how to approach members of the opposite sex. These introductory chapters were composed somewhat later, scholars suggest probably the fifth century. Since in his letter to the Romans Paul quoted a passage from Proverbs, we can conclude with some degree of certainty that he was familiar with the Jewish Wisdom literature (cf. Rom 12:20 and Proverbs 25:21–22)

> My son, pay attention to my wisdom,
> listen carefully to what I know ...
> Take no notice of a loose-living woman,
> for the lips of this alien drip with honey,
> her words are smoother than oil,
> but their outcome is bitter as wormwood,
> sharp as a two-edged sword.
>
> And now, my son, listen to me,
> never deviate from what I say:
> set your course as far from her as possible,
> go nowhere near the door of her house,
> For you will surrender your honour to others.
> Drink the water from your own cistern,
> fresh water from your own well.

> Do not let your fountains flow to waste elsewhere,
> nor your streams in the public streets.
> Let them be for yourself alone,
> not for strangers at the same time...
>
> Find joy with the wife you married in your youth,
> fair as a hind, graceful as a fawn.
> Let hers be the company you keep,
> hers the breasts that ever fill you with delight,
> hers the love that ever holds you captive.
> Why be seduced, my son, by an alien woman,
> and fondle the breast of a woman who is a stranger?
> (Proverbs 5).

The book of Proverbs and the wisdom of Ben Sira taught the same basic message which Paul addressed to his brothers in Thessaloniki.

But his pastoral advice and the language he clothed it in seem to clash against what we know of the advice Jesus offered. He spoke to men and women while the others, including Paul, spoke about women, but not to women, and addressed their advice about sex and marriage to men. And what they said was based on stereotypes hostile to women. Jesus and the others were functioning in differing worlds, pushing differing sets of values, preaching differing messages.

In the wide world where Paul was working, women were obliged to remain chaste, and faithful if married while men could sleep around without much disapproval. This social and gender divide governing sexual activity was what Paul had to contend with. According to Jesus' message (and Paul's preaching) both sexes were bound by the same law. While the contemporary Roman and Greek world tended to condone marital wanderings on the part of husbands and to view prenuptial sexual behaviour by men, especially young men, as a comparatively venial offence, Paul demanded

chastity also from men. The same moral standard was required of all Christians, men and women, rich and poor, regardless of their social status.

Paul therefore had advice for male believers about how to manage their passions. His advice was to choose a wife, sleep with her and no-one else. And besides, all male believers had to behave honourably towards their wives. Marriage was not a form of legalised lust. A man's wife was not to be seen just as an object, a vessel, a utensil who was there to satisfy his sexual passions. Marriage was the antidote for unlawful sexual activity. But even so, in this relationship the male partner had to act with honour.

Paul accepted that a man's basic passions had to be satisfied. Some solution had to be found to replace the sexual excesses which normally involved other men's wives or city prostitutes, or both. They were all the same, the Thessalonians and the Corinthians.

To the Corinthians he would say, 'Because of the temptation to fornication, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband' (1 Cor 7:2).

To the Thessalonians he wrote that God wanted the new Christian believers (Paul's 'brothers') to keep away from fornication, and therefore that each one of them (of the men) should know how to acquire a wife (a vessel, a *skeuos*), but not in any selfish, lustful manner, like the pagans. They had to behave honourably, treating their wives with respect, not abusing them or treating them just as sexual objects, as instruments or vessels to satisfy their unnatural passions, or sleeping with other men's wives, thereby taking advantage of a brother 'in these matters'. Paul told them that the Lord always punishes these kinds of sins.

The image of a *skeuos*, a utensil, a container was a particularly explicit literary device, perhaps confronting to a modern reader who might think it to be rather crude. No wonder some of the modern translations are more discreet.

There were several dimensions to the metaphor as it referred to a man's wife. She could be the container in which the embryo was developed, a type of oven in which the foetus was cooked. Or his wife could be the container or sheath into which the husband planted his member in order to produce an offspring, or to assuage his natural, sexual drives.

Being his vessel, a type of kitchen utensil, an antidote to masculine urges, a wife belonged to her husband. When he 'acquired' her, she became one of his possessions so that by interfering with her, another man trespassed on his property. Adultery was not so much an offence against the woman. It compromised a man's position as head of the family and his property rights as a husband.

Furthermore, this image Paul used is reminiscent of Aristotle's pseudo-biological description of the process of the development of the foetus in the female body. While the male was the active principle or the efficient cause of the foetus in the procreational process, a man's wife was the passive principle, the one whom her partner impregnates. The process went on inside the female. She provided the basic materials and the space where the little person was produced, but her partner was really the source, the cause of the final product – the living person.

> The male is the active principle, the party which causes the movement to occur, whereas the female is the passive party. She receives the activity of the male and is moved by him in the act of procreation. The male is active and causes movement, and the female is passive and is set in movement. The foetus is formed by the male and female, but only in the sense that a bed is formed from the conjunction of the activity of the carpenter working on a piece of timber (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, book 1, chaps. 21 & 22, 729b–730b).

Aristotle considered that in the act of generation the male was like a potter or a carpenter, while the female was the timber

or the clay being used – she provided the material, but her man provided the movement, the *dynamis*, the life and form. She was the receptacle, the container, the vessel – the oven.

As Paul would have it, and in the world in which he had been brought up, for a man of passion marriage was the answer: 'As a safeguard against fornication let every man know how to procure his own vessel.'

Further Pauline Ruminations about Women

Any contemporary theological library has to include at least a small collection of books and articles commenting on Paul's two letters to his mob in Corinth. And off to the side you will find a shelf of material on what he had to say in Chapter 7, being one of the earliest documents produced by a follower of Jesus. Paul's first epistle was written perhaps only months after his letter to the Thessalonians.

In Chapter 7, Paul was attempting to answer some curly questions the Corinthians had asked him about. These were questions about, amongst other things, marriage and sexual abstinence, about whether it was best for a Christian to remain married or to choose to live a celibate life without the complications that accompany intimate sexual encounters. In his reply, the author ventured into the world of human relations, into the murky world of sexual urges of men and women, conjugal rights and sexual abstinence, the power of the devil, divorce and virginity. Most of what he wrote need not concern us here. But in dealing with these issues Paul provided his readers with some insights into his attitudes towards women and how they fitted into his way of thinking about the world.

We can only guess what questions the Corinthians asked, but he began with the curious remark that, 'It was good for a man not to touch a woman.'

'Touching' was a familiar literary euphemism for sexual intimacy. At first glance, this opening statement might appear a touch heretical. It might seem to undermine the message at the heart of the creational myth of Adam and Eve. It seems to clash with the theological truth that the creator of the world designed the animal kingdom and the human species for coupling and procreation. It was a religious belief which Jesus had endorsed. And besides, on the face of it, this blunt statement offends the dictates of common sense and our daily experience of life. Paul appeared to be launching into his advice with a rather provocative observation.

Three hundred years later Jerome would adopt this unorthodox statement to support a furious drive to downgrade the institution of marriage and to establish a biblical foundation for a virginal way of life that he was keen to promote. Paul's brief opening proposition would be surgically removed from its Corinthian context, endorsed as a policy statement to support sexual asceticism, virginity and the celibate life, and presumed to apply universally to all ages. But Paul's opening gambit demands to be treated with more subtlety and respect than Jerome and many others later afforded it.

The blunt proposition that a man should not touch a woman was more than likely an extract from the letter of request which Corinth had sent to Paul. It had perhaps been included in that lost letter at the insistence of an extreme puritanical faction within the local church. If this reading of Paul's opening statement is correct, namely that it is a quotation from the letter Paul received, the authors of the Corinthian letter had suggested that in their particular circumstances it might have been better if a man did not touch a woman, better if there was no physical contact between a man and his wife. But why would they have said that?

It's possible, however, particularly in light of what he had written to his brothers in Thessaloniki, that the Christian warriors in Corinth had meant to suggest that it was better if a man had no contact with prostitutes, with the women of the back alleys and

the waterfront who painted their faces and wore their hair high on their heads, or cascading over their shoulders and down their backs. The city was notorious for the services it was able to offer.

Others have suggested that Paul's opening remark had its origins in the classical debate that the Stoics and the Cynics had conducted for centuries, and which would have been the static in the background of discussions about sex and marriage in Greek cities like Corinth.

The Cynics were of the view that any male member of the species who was serious about life should not waste his time engaging in trivial sexual conjunctions with women. They thought he should devote his energies to his intellectual and personal development. For some of these Cynics, the thrill of masturbation was the obvious antidote to a man's basic sexual needs. It was always better not to touch a woman.

Whatever its origins, whether the view of Cynics or of extreme ascetics in Corinth or Paul's own opinion, this simple proposition is rather chauvinistic. Paul immediately took the side of the man. And it is at odds with what was to follow when the author began to expound his version of the intimate relationship between a man and his wife.

Once Paul had opened his remarks with this enigmatic aphorism, he took up its basic theme (men touching women) and began to play different tunes around this motif – modifying and qualifying, rejecting and enriching the message of perpetual abstinence. He told his readers what he had previously told the Thessalonians, that he understood most men needed to touch a woman, that sexual urges could flood over a man, overwhelm him and lead him astray, into the clutches of Satan. But it's hard to miss the fact that at this stage only the male of the human species was at the centre of Paul's remarks. He was dealing with a man's responses when engaging or not engaging with a woman. Women were more like the passive receptacles of a man's sexual drives.

But then the author suddenly changed his focus. He continued by saying that it was appropriate for husbands to satisfy their needs with their wives. He had already told the men in Thessaloniki the same thing: 'Because of the temptation to immorality … each man should have his own wife', adding immediately that 'each woman should have her own husband'. In this way both men and women could cleanse the system of its concupiscence.

Total abstinence was not a realistic answer, at least for most men and women. Paul went on to develop this idea briefly before moving off in another direction, adding that what he was about to recommend was by way of concession, not a command. I imagine him thinking out loud, strolling up and down as he dictated an answer for his enquirers.

He observed that it was good if a man didn't need to touch a woman and that, as far as he was concerned, the life he was leading without a sexual partner was preferable to the marital state. And even if a man had to be married to satisfy his needs, it was sometimes good for him not to touch his wife so that he could concentrate on higher things – on praying and reflecting on the meaning of life. Perhaps we can notice in Paul's advice the same type of thinking about marriage and sexual encounters we have already seen from Aristotle's friend Theophrastus. Paul's second principle was that any sexual retreat should only be for a short time – and by mutual agreement.

Immediately following the curious aphorism that men should keep their hands to themselves, Paul advised his brothers and sisters in Corinth that to avoid the basic human urge to engage in sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and presumably shouldn't be driven to sleep with someone else's. Each woman should have her own husband, and again, not sleep with other men to assuage her basic urges. Nothing new here. Basic marital morality, except that Paul was not concerned only with the rights and privileges of patriarchs and husbands, viewing wives as

property or lesser beings, at least as far as sexual satisfaction went. Women had their rights and privileges too.

According to him, the wife had her rights in the bedroom. Her man should pay attention to her and be ready to meet her sexual demands. And conversely, the wife should accept that her man also had his conjugal rights and she was duty bound to honour them. Each party had a mutual duty one to the other, to sleep together, to welcome one another into an intimate embrace which would satisfy and anaesthetize their sexual urges.

We read nothing so explicit from Jesus. He had only put his toe into the muddy waters of sex and marriage. According to the Gospel writers, he had spoken once about the rules governing divorce and had informed his audience on another occasion that any man who stared hard at another man's wife had already indulged his adulterous urges. That's as far as he went, though his ethical stand was pretty radical. But while Jesus had just tip-toed to the edge, Paul had stripped off and waded in over his head.

Paul was basing his marital advice on two mutual principles. First, no wife should think she was in command of her own body or that she had exclusive control over her sexuality. Her husband was the one who enjoyed power over her body.

Surprisingly, the reverse was also true. A shock to all male members, to every husband, and a surprise to their Jewish or pagan wives, was Paul's second principle, that a husband shouldn't presume that he was in command of his own body. As far as his sexuality was concerned, his woman was in charge. No sex for him wherever he wandered, whenever he felt the need, with whomsoever took his fancy. The prevailing cultural custom which favoured men and minimised their sexual misdemeanours was removed from the ledger. Men and women were equal, at least in the bedroom.

How Paul found himself writing in this way about sex and marriage is not clear, though we can assume that some of the believers in Corinth (where sex was a popular sport) had asked

him a few questions which he felt obliged to answer. His general advice was that at least in the home, partners should accommodate each other. No wife or husband should turn his/her face to the wall and refuse to sleep in the embrace of her/his partner (except maybe for a short period, and only by agreement). Married couples should certainly not engage in any protracted period of sexual abstinence, and if they did, they would be giving Satan the opportunity to step in and, because of a man or woman's low level of self-control, the Evil One would occupy the vacant space and entice one of them to sneak into someone else's bed. Even if based on a rather bleak view of human nature and on a superstitious belief in the power of the devil, Paul's advice was clear and practical.

But his advice about sexual equality in the home was not a novel idea. Paul was a man of his times. The Stoics had been talking the same language for a long time. The Greek philosopher Plutarch, who followed the Stoic tradition, would be writing essays on ethical and sociological topics, including on marriage, forty years or so after the believers in Corinth had been corresponding with Paul.

> As the mixing of liquids, according to what men of science say, extends throughout their entire content, so also in the case of married people there ought to be a mutual amalgamation of their bodies, property, friends and relations (Plutarch, *Moralia*, *Conjugalia Praecepta* or *Advice to Bride and Groom*, para. 34)

As early as the second century BC, Antipater had written in his treatise *On Marriage* that marriages were unlike any other friendships because marriages demanded 'complete fusions, as wine with water'. According to him, husbands and wives 'not only share a partnership of property and children ... and the soul, but they alone also share their bodies.'

Musonius was a well-known Stoic philosopher who was teaching in Rome during the reign of Nero. He wrote several

discourses, including *On Sexual Indulgence; What is the Chief End of Marriage* and *Is Marriage a Handicap for the Pursuit of Philosophy?* In his last essay he posed the question, 'To whom is everything thought to be common – bodies, souls, possessions – except a husband and wife?', and again, in his lecture on the principal purpose of marriage, he stated that married couples considered 'everything common property and nothing one's own, not even the body itself'.

This form of equality in the bedroom and within marriage as preached by Paul was not new, but what Paul wrote to the Corinthians was significant. It established within the Christian community the equal status of women *vis-a-vis* their husbands, at least within the privacy of the home.

Like Jesus, Paul also felt moved to make some observations about divorce, and on this subject he followed the lead of Jesus and endorsed his counter-cultural policy of equal rights before the law. He had obviously been asked a few questions about divorce and, focusing on marriages between two Christians, he relied on what had fallen from the lips of his leader. Someone had filled him in on what Jesus had said to Paul's fellow Pharisees:

> To the married I give this charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) – the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Cor 7:10–11).

In the Palestinian Jewish community at the time Jesus and Paul were teaching or writing, the law on divorce set out in the book of Deuteronomy was much disputed, especially among the Pharisees. One school permitted a man to divorce his wife for silly reasons, and another school allowed it only for serious sexual misconduct. But whatever one's view, the right to divorce was available to the husband, and only to him.

According to the Gospel authors, some Pharisees had challenged Jesus about his stand on divorce, asking him a particularly chauvinistic question – at least by today's standards. They asked if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife and reminded Jesus that Moses had allowed men to write a certificate of divorce (Mark 10.2).

Even though Paul had been educated as a Pharisee and members of that faction were in favour of some form of divorce to benefit the husband, it was Jesus' answer to the divorce question which formed the basis of Paul's advice to Corinth.

From the beginning of creation, God had made members of the race 'male and female', and for that reason a man would leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two would become one flesh. They were no longer two, but one. So in principle, what God had joined together, no-one should put asunder. However, because of human weakness and sinfulness, Moses had enacted a concession (for men only) that allowed divorce.

The important stand Jesus had made was that in matters of divorce, the wife and her husband were bound by the same rule.

> Whoever divorces his wife and marries another (woman) commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery (Mark 10:11).

The official position within the churches to which Paul belonged was that, at least in the marital partnership, wives were on a footing equal to their men. The old Mosaic concession to human weakness had been removed. Jesus had established a new regime which had resulted in a new law. The kingdom was already present in their midst. Sin and human weakness had been conquered. There was no longer any need for the Mosaic concession. God's original plan had to be restored. In the kingdom, men and their wives were equal, and the new law was meant to reflect this reality.

In the matters of divorce, despite what the intellectuals and the Pharisees had to say, despite what the Old Law provided to

favour husbands, for Jesus, wives in the kingdom were not to be at any disadvantage, and Paul was following 'the Lord'.

Paul moved on to other issues which had been bubbling away under the surface in Corinth. While conceding that his next piece of advice was his own recommendation rather than a command from the Lord, he wrote that personally he would prefer that everyone, man and woman, remain celibate, just like himself. As we have already noted, he complained that unlike the other missionaries, he and his fellow missionary, Barnabas, did not enjoy any female company on their journeys. He accepted, however, that each one had his own individual gift from God.

What Paul was driving at is not clear from this distance. Perhaps his special gift was that he was celibate and therefore able to move around, without being answerable to any partner. His body and its urges did not belong to anyone else. He had no bedroom duties to perform, and no-one but himself and God to please. On this basis, a wife was considered to be an encumbrance to a preacher who wanted to take his work seriously.

On the other hand, maybe Paul was telling his readers that he was out of Satan's reach. Unlike many of his brothers in Thessaloniki or Corinth for example, where sexual indulgence was popular, Paul had been blessed with a low libido, so that in his case, a wife was surplus to requirements. He was well able to control his sexual urges. In any event, he obviously assumed that a true missionary was a male believer – a salesman who could live on the road without the services of a female companion.

As a general policy, and contrary to what was reported of God's plan for mankind in the scriptures, Paul thought that it was better to remain single – at least for the Corinthians as they were waiting expectantly in their new heavenly condition for the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. Whether this was a general policy to be extended to all Christian men and women down the centuries was a question that would not have entered Paul's mind. He was

replying to specific questions in a particular context – a context which he identified – and unaware that men and women would be reading his words in Australia, for example, in the early years of the third millennium and trying to make sense of them.

In the beginning the members of the early churches were waiting anxiously for a second coming of Jesus. They believed that his coming was just on the other side of the horizon. Some were worried about the fate of those who had already died before Jesus' final return. What was going to happen to them? Would they be included in the rally, or had they already gone over the edge and disappeared into nothingness?

As Paul was dictating his letter to Corinth, he entertained what proved to be the fallacious belief that the shape of the visible world was passing away and the time for it to end was at hand. The period God had appointed for the world's continuance was short, and in view of the trouble facing them, it was better if a person, man or woman, remained as he/she was – if single, to remain single; if married, to stay that way. At that stage, Paul's rule for his churches was that in the brief time remaining, everyone should be satisfied with the life God had assigned to him or her. Stability at all costs. Peace and tranquility for the time left. No changes. No disturbances. They should stay just as they were. Silly to make new commitments when all is going to collapse within a few days – months at the most. Soon they would all be in heaven with the Lord.

Paul advised that 'from now on' believers should live in the world as though they were not in the world. Those who had wives should live as though they had none; those who mourned, as though they were not mourning; and those who had dealings with the world as though they had none, 'for the form of this world is passing away'.

Christians were living in a new world. Their flesh existence had been transformed by baptism. They were already heavenly, other creatures. Those who had wives should live as though they

had none because that was how husbands would be in heaven, like Adam was originally, before Eve had been created as his partner.

Again, it seems significant that Paul did not think to advise the wives that in their present circumstances they should also act as though they had no husbands. His focus was automatically, unconsciously concentrated on husbands. While Jesus had taught his followers how to live as kingdom-people in the world, Paul was teaching his followers how to live outside the world, on the other side.

However, even as he and his people were waiting for the end, Paul was no crazed ideologue. He knew that humankind's sexual urges were powerful and could be destructive. When push came to shove, if a person couldn't cope, if the drives were too powerful, he/she should marry and escape Satan. It was better to marry than to be consumed by fire.

Paul provided a number of reasons for his recommendation to Jesus' followers that they should adopt the way of virginity and his reasons had nothing to do with sexual asceticism. According to him, in order to be free of any anxiety, any distraction, ideally a man should remain celibate. A man who was free of the encumbrances associated with being married could concern himself exclusively with the affairs of God – preaching, praying, journeying. The married man, on the other hand, had to please his wife, and Paul would have known that some of the apostles and many of the believers were married. And inevitably, as Christians and as married men, their interests would sometimes have been in conflict.

The married woman's heart would also be split between God and her husband, whereas the unmarried woman or virgin could attend to God's business, without restraint. As Paul saw it, a virgin's job was to discover how to be holy 'in body and spirit', rather than being anxious about 'worldly affairs' and pleasing her husband.

This concluding gloss, which was couched in rather chauvinistic terms, seems somewhat out of tune with what we know of Jesus'

mentality and his way of relating to his female friends. Why was it the *virgin's* calling to be holy 'in body and spirit', and not also the vocation of a married woman? Was a married woman, by virtue of being married, having sex with her husband, giving birth to children, feeding them on her breast and attending to her family's household needs, not holy 'in body and spirit'? Had her body and spirit been compromised by living as a married woman? Did Paul think that a married woman was living a less angelic life, that she had not withdrawn from the world? Not yet transformed into a new creature. Still tied to the old world, to Adam's world of sin and sexual couplings.

Paul agreed that it was not a sin to marry, but it's hard to avoid the conclusion that people like Jerome would later draw, that he thought the married state was inferior – a step down in Christian living, involving some degree of contamination – less angelic.

Paul was of the opinion that, at least for the Corinthians and in the circumstances in which they found themselves, it was better to remain unmarried. There is nothing wrong with marriage, especially if the storms of concupiscence proved too turbulent, but the unmarried state was preferable and peaceful. 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.'

The question is, what did Paul mean by it being 'better to remain unmarried'? Did he mean more virtuous, more pleasing to the God who created us 'male and female', more in accord with the mind of Jesus, more ethical, or more liberating? Perhaps he meant that in view of the imminent re-appearance of the Lord and the approaching end of our world, it was more prudent and practical for a man not to clutter up his life with new responsibilities(a wife, education of children, in-laws and debts), but to put his head down like an athlete and lunge for the finishing line. Maybe Paul's statement had nothing to do with the value of virginity or with any general policy of favouring virginal integrity and sexual abstinence over marital coupling. Perhaps he was merely advising

that since time was limited, the Corinthians should stabilise their lives.

However, on balance, after reading this epistle and searching between the lines, it is difficult to avoid the overall impression that Paul considered marriage as second rate, as an antidote to sins of the flesh, a distraction which interfered with the work of the gospel. He appeared to think that although in principle baptised men and women were equal in the sight of God, female virgins were holier in 'body and spirit' than their married sisters. Virginity was the natural state for angels. Adam and Eve had both been virgins before their Fall into sin. In baptism, followers of Christ had entered a new, heavenly world. Virginity, not marriage, was to be a feature of their new vocation. Paul seems to have been adding a number of complex levels to Jesus' simple message as it would be laid out in the Gospels.

Chapter 7 of his epistle consists almost entirely of what Paul admitted was his personal opinion on the topic of marriage, sexual restraint, celibacy and virginity. We don't know what the Corinthians made of his letter or whether they modified their behaviour to conform to his advice. But once his letter had been read to the community, what were the locals to do with it? Archive it for future reference? Re-read it occasionally to see whether the advice had been heeded? Or perhaps share it with neighbouring communities, copying the text and circulating it.

The locals sought to pass on Paul's advice to other churches for their instruction. He was becoming a giant in the early church. He had been authorised by the church in Jerusalem to be its travelling salesman and to preach the Jesus gospel to the pagans. What he wrote had a local flavour, but behind his advice were values and attitudes, beliefs and spiritual insights, a vision of the world, an ideology – all transcending the particular, and all part of the mix which constituted Christianity for the early believers. His words became normative for the future of their faith-system.

The difficulty for all Christians, however, is how to decide what to jettison and what to salvage, how to leave aside the particular while conserving the essence of the message. To resolve the problem one has to know what the real business of the Lord was. Ritual worship, psalm recitation, building churches, administering schools, preserving a complex code of orthodoxy? Or feeding the poor, caring for the sick, supporting the elderly, comforting those who mourn and building up the kingdom? Where should a believer's preferences lie?

Living without the distraction of a wife, or the touch of a woman had not proved to be the secret to an uncluttered existence or necessarily the best way to further the spread of the gospel. And what was perhaps appropriate advice for the people of Corinth in the middle of the first century is not necessarily ideal, or practical, or relevant for the faith-people living in the twenty-first century.

In his Chapter 7, Paul was not addressing the question of finding a place for women in his ministry, or whether they should share in the power structure and be leaders in the local community, or whether they should occupy some position within the hierarchy. He was directing his remarks to questions of intimacy between a man and a woman and the question of equal rights in the process of divorce, and to questions about the lives of those, like himself, who choose to live and work as celibates. Paul was giving his slant on the relationship of a couple within their marriage and while asserting their equality within the intimacy of their sexual relationship, he was not making any comment one way or the other about a man and a woman's relationship within the family and in the community. His mind was still fixed within a patriarchal mould of family life and society.

However, being a male himself and a trained Pharisee, the author seems to have been demonstrating some unconscious preference for exploring the male side of the marital bond rather than the female. Perhaps contrary to Jesus' message about God creating men and women for each other, to live together as one

unit, he advocated a celibate, virginal, angelic existence in which men and women live separate, independent lives. The question may be asked – how did this line play out in the life of the early church? And how did Paul's advice determine the position and status of young female believers?

On Paul's personal recommendation, virginity was to become a way of life for young girls, and celibacy was to be made compulsory for members of the clergy. Jesus' saying about being a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven would take on a new meaning. Whereas the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus spoke was a reality to be found here on earth, among men and women as they went about living their daily lives, the kingdom of which Paul and those who came after him spoke, was an otherworld reality, a new creation, over and above, and separate from the physical world of ordinary men and women.

At the conclusion of his first letter to his church in Corinth, Paul engaged in a typical Pharisaical and theological discourse about the resurrection of the dead.

> What is sown in perishable, what is raised is imperishable ... It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body ... The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven ... I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable (1 Cor 15:42–50).

However, being a male himself and a trained Pharisee, the author seems to have been demonstrating some unconscious preference for exploring the male side of the marital bond rather than the female. And whatever his opinion might have been about how Christians should behave as they waited for the imminent end of the world as they knew it, contemporary Christian men and ministers have to decide whether in the present age, a wife would be an encumbrance or a help, whether it is 'better' for them to live

alone as celibates or live as God created them, as man and woman, husband and wife, for coupling and completing one another.

Paul's Reputation as a Misogynist

> 'As in all the churches of the saints, the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. Rather, let them be submissive, as in fact the law says. If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home' (1 Cor 14:34-36).

You might reasonably conclude from this text that Paul was a rather autocratic, perhaps misogynistic leader who didn't hesitate to use his authority to keep women of the community in their place – silent in church and subservient at home. Paul the patriarch and misogynist.

If you wanted to find proof beyond reasonable doubt that Apostle Paul was an enemy of the feminist cause, that he was in fact a dyed-in-the-wool, unreconstructed misogynist, you only have to quote these two verses of his first letter to the people of Corinth. On the face of it these verses show clearly that Paul was against women's active participation in liturgical assemblies, and in favour of an inferior status for women. They paint the great man in a very poor light.

The passage seems so unambiguous. Just a plain straight-out prohibition. Paul agreed with the Greek heroes, Plato and Aristotle, and with the cultural prejudices of the day. Women were inferior beings. They had to do as they were told and accept their proper place in the scheme of things. He was issuing his last word on the topic of women in the assemblies. If any woman in the group wanted to remain a Christian, she had to be obedient. Paul was claiming that he was repeating a commandment of the Lord and that was the end of it. No further questions (1 Cor 14:37–38).

But don't go away. This is not, in fact, the end of the matter. These few verses have presented modern scholars with a multiplicity of problems. No-one can tell us, for example, what law the author was thinking of which required women to be submissive. And who were 'the women' who were not permitted to speak? All women, or just rowdy, quarrelsome ones?

But of even more concern, many scholars consider that these few verses did not form part of Paul's original letter; that even though they appear under his name, he didn't in fact write them; and that even though they are part of what is accepted as inspired, canonical literature, they do not reflect his thinking about women and their place in the liturgical assemblies of the churches he founded.

If these scholarly propositions are well-founded, this quotation is useless in any search to discover Paul's mind-set *vis-à-vis* women. It is no help in determining what Paul of Tarsus's pastoral position was on controlling women's behaviour in the liturgical gatherings, about whether he had a general policy that all women should remain silent, or only the noisy, argumentative ones, or whether all women were free to pray publicly and prophesy as the spirit moved them.

This is not to say, however, that this little passage in 1 Corinthians 14 is unimportant. Whether authentic or not, the relevant passage formed part of Paul's letter from very early times, almost certainly from sometime in the first century, and it reflected what some early believers expected of women in the assembly, namely, silence and submission.

Furthermore, while the passage is very probably not a Pauline text in the sense that it was written by Paul himself, from very early times it appeared under his name, as his words, and was accepted until very recently as bearing his authority. By inserting these verses into Paul's long letter, some scribe (mistakenly, one hopes) was demeaning the reputation of the great missionary and presenting him to the world as the authority for an ecclesiastical policy to keep women underfoot, on their knees.

Because of its anti-feminist flavour, this quotation of three short verses above Paul's signature has proved extremely difficult material to deal with. There is a team of reputable exegetes who have concluded (probably correctly) that it did not form part of Paul's letter and should be removed from the official text. It was inserted into the original document sometime after he wrote his letter, though all agree on the basis of early manuscript evidence that it was not long afterwards.

Other reputable exegetes, however, consider that, on balance, the passage did form part of Paul's original letter. Some think that he lifted it word for word from the letter he had received from Corinth asking him a series of questions and that Paul, for some reason, simply inserted it into his letter in reply.

To complicate the issue, others have concluded it is more likely that Paul wrote the verses to solve a particular problem in the Corinthian community, a problem of noisy, outspoken women, and for this reason his prohibition should not be applied, in their opinion, in any general sense to control or silence all women of whatever century.

And of course there are some more conservative exegetes who believe the text is truly Pauline and that it was meant to establish the general principle, a rather chauvinistic one, that all women should be silent in public assemblies and obedient to their husbands. Over the centuries, some of the Fathers have quoted these verses with approval to do just that.

But the overall weight of scholarly opinion now is that these few verses fit uncomfortably into the text, that they interrupt the flow of Paul's material, and that they were introduced into Paul's letter by a faceless copyist.

The solution to the problem as to whether 1 Corinthians 14:34–36 is a genuine Pauline text rests on the following basic, academic conclusions.

First, it is clear that on the face of it this prohibition negates what Paul wrote to his Corinthians in Chapter 11 verse 5 where

he clearly implied that a woman could pray in public and prophesy, provided she was wearing a head-covering.

Second, none of the ancient manuscripts which include the original Greek text of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians omit these two verses. Consequently, if they didn't in fact form part of Paul's original letter, they appeared in the text at a very early stage, sometime in the first century.

Third, while some of the more ancient manuscripts have these verses positioned after verse 33 (where they stand in all our contemporary translations), other manuscripts have them tacked on after verse 40. We're not talking here about a misplaced word, a single letter or even an isolated phrase. How such a slab of text came to be positioned by a copyist in different places is not easy to explain. The raw fact which emerges from this manuscript evidence is that these verses do not appear to belong to the original version of Paul's letter.

Fourth, if you remove verses 33b, 34 and 35 (but not 36), the text flows seamlessly and logically from verse 33a to verse 36 and onto verses 37 to 40. Verses 33b, 34 and 35 have a different grammatical construction in the original Greek text, being written exclusively in the feminine form, while the two passages on either side, the passage above (verses 26–33a) and the passage below (verses 36–40), are addressed to men and women, and were constructed in the masculine form which grammatically could apply generically to either gender.

Fifth, the insertion of this passage calling for women to remain silent in the assembly and submissive can perhaps be explained by the fact that in verse 28 and verse 30, Paul was calling for silence in certain liturgical circumstances, namely in respect of a speaker in tongues if there was no-one present to interpret, and secondly in respect to a prophet if another prophet was in the process of making his or her revelation. The requirement of silence in the prayer assemblies may have inspired a copyist, on his own initiative, to insert this foreign regulation into the text.

And finally, it would seem that no scholar can provide a satisfactory answer to the question as to what 'law' (*nomos*) Paul or the author of the verses was referring to. The New Testament literature refers to the Hebrew Bible as the 'law', but no part of this 'law' required a woman to be silent or submissive, and being a trained Pharisee, Paul would have known that. Many theologians over the years have 'interpreted' Paul as referring to the law in Gen 3:16: 'To the woman he (God) said, Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'

Perhaps the author's reference was to the rabbinical law, or to the Roman law, or to law in general whereby, according to the culture of the day, women had to be submissive to their husbands and demure in public. But no-one knows.

In the face of these basic, academic conclusions, some scholars have still insisted that Paul did write these verses, and that if they did not appear in his original letter, he had inserted them soon afterwards. These scholars then have to explain what he meant, how they came to be in different places in the ancient manuscripts, and how these verses can be read together with what he was writing in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Not an easy exercise.

Some of these scholars have concluded that Paul was dealing with a particular problem which had arisen in Corinth, that he was intending to control those women who were socialising, gossiping and chattering in the public prayer meetings, or that he wanted to shut down those ill-informed women who were constantly interrupting and asking stupid questions. None of these explanations, in my opinion, carry the same likelihood as the interference of a foreign hand.

Other scholars considered that Paul might have lifted these verses from the letter he had received and in his reply was quoting the words back to the people of Corinth; that they were in fact not his opinion, but it was the standard policy to silence women – a policy adopted by one or some of the factions in Corinth, and that

Paul was providing his rather sarcastic reply in verse 36 where he changes into the generic masculine form to address both males and females and dismisses any suggestion of such a prohibition: 'What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?'

This of course is a reasonable explanation and one which casts Paul in an even more favourable light.

Finally, in an attempt to explain these verses and preserve them as truly Pauline, Ben Witherington III, in his *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, pointed to the ancient popular practice among pagan Greeks of consulting the oracle of Delphi. The prophetess Pythia used to provide answers to personal questions about marriage and divorce, children and death. People came to her from afar seeking answers to their personal problems. Witherington thought that some women in the community at Corinth might have been disrupting the assembly by demanding answers from the prophets and prophetesses to their personal and mundane questions. According to him, Paul only wanted to silence these women, not to silence all women.

On the evidence, it is safe to conclude that it's more than likely these critical verses do not reflect Paul's pastoral policy about the behaviour of women during the liturgical assembly, though this is certainly not to say that this passage has not been a negative and powerful force in the life of the church. It reflects the values and attitudes of some of the believers during the first century of this era. It would seem that early in the piece, some faceless scribe took the opportunity to insert into Paul's letter a solution of his own – a solution which some faction or other in Corinth was seeking to impose. But this was a cruel stab in the back for a man who was so keen to defend and preserve his reputation. From the earliest times these words have been presented to believers as those of Paul himself. They came with his authority. They have been quoted down

the centuries in support of a general policy to control and silence women in the life of the church. But in my opinion, though they remain a part of the official, canonical text, they were not Paul's and do not represent his opinion.

However, in his life and ministry, and in his writings, Paul didn't do justice to Jesus' message. While Jesus had been what we would now call an enlightened feminist, Paul proved to be more conservative, more traditional in his relationship with women, and patriarchal when it came to family relationships. Unfortunately, without showing signs of a typical misogynist mindset, he nevertheless laid the foundation for the emergence of a particular variety of misogyny within the early Christian communities. Those who followed him, even those who wrote in his name, continued in a direction away from Jesus and his message, towards a mentality and culture which sought to control women, to keep them in their place, to deny them a place in the power structure of the institution, to speak of them in a disparaging manner and to regard them as inferior to men. Because of his effort to accommodate the gospel message within its contemporary cultural setting, Paul initiated the movement's slide back into a patriarchal world, into the cultural values of male superiority and female subservience. This return to old attitudes and values was further promoted throughout the Christian diaspora by the anonymous author of the Pastoral Letters. And as the local churches moved into the second, third and early fourth centuries, we can witness a downhill stumbling and tumbling into a pit of women-haters and fearers, into a witch's brew of misogyny.

The 'Adam and Eve' Myth

The story of Adam and Eve was a powerful myth that functioned deep in the psyche of every religious Jew. A simple fairy story repeated to children by their mothers and fathers to 'explain' how the world started. It told of how animals came to be spread

throughout the land, how men and women first appeared on the earth, and how evil had erupted and infected the world.

The opening chapters of the Bible where the first couple make their appearance are the result of a long oral process of primitive tribes telling and re-telling stories of imaginary events. These events occurred long ago, in the period of our prehistory. The stories had been passed down in oral form from one generation to the next, along a long ancestral line – stories about God, creation, our original ancestors, evil and the devil, stories that entered into the religious psyche of peoples and families.

The Pentateuch as we know it only functioned as a finished text, the Torah, from the period of the Jewish exile. It had travelled through various traditions of different ages until a complete edition of all the five books (the Pentateuch) appeared in the sixth century BC. The book of Genesis, the first book in the collection, begins with the creation narrative and the story of Adam and Eve.

The Bible stories of creation and of the significant actions of humanity's ancestors are only some of a number of versions of the same mysterious events, all of which were circulating in and around Mesopotamia at about the same period. These narratives were all tainted with the same prejudices. They were both patriarchal and misogynistic. The Bible story had told one generation after another that Eve had been inferior to Adam because, according to the fictitious story, she had been created after him and from one of his body parts. Adam had been lonely in the midst of creation and she had been given to him as a companion, to fill the gap. But she had led him astray and when confronted by the creator of the universe, Adam didn't hesitate to hide behind his partner and to level the blame at her. It was she who had given in to the evil serpent. Under the text and in the name of God, young and old were being told that women were weak, dangerous, inferior creatures who were responsible for evil in the world.

> God said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.' The Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent beguiled me and I ate.' ... To the woman God said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (Genesis 3:11–13,16).

We don't know whether Joseph or Mary used to put Jesus to sleep telling him the stories of creation and of Adam and Eve, of the Tree of Knowledge and the serpent. Since the story had a prominent place as the opening passage in the Torah, it would certainly have been known among the people in the mountains around the Lake of Galilee, in tiny villages like Nazareth. But Jesus' parents were unsophisticated people, maybe illiterate, members of the working class, earning their living by the sweat of their brow as God had ordained after Adam's sin. How deeply the creation myth had penetrated into Joseph's household and the subconscious religious mind of Jesus we will never know.

But Jesus didn't appear overly interested in these stories. There is only one oblique reference to them in Matthew's Gospel – to Genesis 1:27:

> Jesus answered, 'have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female', and said 'for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and that two shall become one flesh?' (Matt 19:4–5).

As far as we know, unlike Paul and other Jewish writers, Jesus was not inclined to breathe new life into the myth of Adam and Eve. He obviously knew the story, but he paid practically no

attention to its significance. Paul, however, was different. He was a sophisticated, educated and successful Jew. He had studied the Torah. Adam and Eve and their story would have been part of his stock-in-trade, part of his religious and theological world. After his conversion, he included them seamlessly into the structures of the theological rabbinical arguments he devised to support his pastoral, disciplinary stance. He would set the theological hare running in his authentic letters, initiating a tendency among the men who followed him to trace all kinds of doctrines and dogmas, attitudes, prejudices and regulations back to the original Genesis story about humanity's first parents.

In his third, perhaps fourth letter to Corinth (the one we identify as his second epistle), Paul visited the Adam-Eve motif and injected the story with a dose of growth hormones. In 2 Corinthians 11, by a simple throwaway line, he provided a strong rootstock on which later authors would graft a branch of Christian misogyny.

Paul was worried about his little church in Corinth losing its way. Some ring-ins had arrived in the city and had begun to preach another Jesus and a different message – not the one Paul had learnt from his mystical experiences in the deserts of Arabia and from the other apostles in Jerusalem. Apparently, these mavericks were more compelling preachers than Paul. They were making in-roads and destabilising his community. Paul was experiencing what he described was 'a divine jealousy' of his little churches. As he expressed it, like any father arranging a suitable marriage for his daughter, he had betrothed his communities to Christ and presented them as pure brides to their husband. Paul was like a passionate father who was worried sick for his daughters. He was afraid that the serpent, by his cunning, would lead the Corinthians astray in the same way as it had deceived Eve – yes Eve, not Adam.

Paul obviously had had no doubt that Adam and Eve had been real, historical figures, our first parents and people of importance.

The author of Luke's Gospel would share the same conviction and trace Jesus' genealogical line back to Adam. Paul's passing reference to Eve in his letter and her encounter with the serpent are significant. He included her in his argument so causally, so seamlessly. This is an indication of the intellectual and religious world in which Paul lived and operated.

> I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor 11:3).

A few years after his letters to Corinth, Paul wrote a long dissertation to the believers in Rome. In dealing with humankind's deliverance from sin and death by the power of Christ, this time he called on Adam to strengthen his argument. Sin had entered the world through Adam and as a result, death had spread its tentacles through the whole human race. This first man had prefigured the One who was to come. Whereas through one man's fall many had died, through Jesus Christ the free gift of divine grace had flooded the world. Paul went on to expand the reverse parallels between Adam and Christ. Just as by one man's disobedience many had been made sinners, by one man's obedience many would be made righteous (Rom 5:12–19). Paul shanghaied Adam, introducing him so naturally into his train of thought and at the same time giving a little hint of the discontinuity framework in which his mind operated. Jesus was not the fulfillment of God's initial plan when he created Adam and begun the story of humanity. Jesus had disrupted the flow of history and reversed what Adam had done. Two completely contrasting dispensations – before and after Jesus paralleling evil and grace, earth and heaven.

Before Paul had begun to tinker with it, the story of Adam and Eve had been expanded, interpreted and twisted out of its simple, original shape by Jewish scholars from about 200 BC. Well into the second and third centuries of the present era they were

continuing to show interest in this pair from the book of Genesis. Jewish Apocrypha and the pseudo-epigraphic literature, as well as the writings of Jewish intellectuals and historians, witness to a nation's fascination with the figure of our first parents.

In the history of his people, the Jewish historian Titus Flavius Josephus (who was a contemporary of Paul and a native of Jerusalem) wrote an expanded version of the creation of our first parents and their fall from grace. He belonged to a long line of authors (all males) who blamed Eve for humanity's misfortunes. According to Josephus, the Creator had punished her for her sin by inflicting on her the curse of womanhood.

Josephus believed that after the seventh day of creation, Moses (who according to the legend was the author of the book of Genesis and of the other four books of the Pentateuch) had begun to talk philosophically about the formation of the human race. God had taken dust from the ground and fashioned a man, implanting in him a spirit and a soul. This man was called Adam.

When God saw that his man had no female companion and that Adam was wondering about the other animals which were male and female, God put him to sleep, extracted one of his ribs and formed a woman. She was brought to him and he 'knew' her (or in other words, he had an intimate, sexual coupling with her). The name of this woman was 'Eve', signifying the mother of all the living.

Josephus moved on to deal with our first parents' fall from grace. Adam had made excuses for his sin and had asked God not to be angry with him. He told God that Eve had deceived him, and she in turn had passed the blame on to the serpent. God had punished Adam because in his weakness he had given in to his wife, and he also made Eve suffer the inconvenience of monthly purges and the pains of childbirth. She had persuaded Adam to sin with the same arguments the serpent had used to convince her to eat of the tree of knowledge.

Philo was a young contemporary of Paul living in Alexandria and like him, educated as a Pharisee in the Jewish law, living and working, like Paul, with one foot in the Jewish culture and the other in the contemporary Roman world, and like him, a Roman citizen. He was a Jewish philosopher and commentator on the Jewish scriptures. He held views similar to Paul's, though more colourful. He had much to say about wives and their naturally schizophrenic, duplicitous character, leading to an amusing diatribe against female tricks of their trade, their fashions and hairstyles.

In his work *On the Birth of Abel*, Philo revealed seriously distorted prejudices towards women and plastered bright colours onto the customary female stereotypes. Identifying with his male readers, his mates, he wrote,

> Two women live with each individual among us, both unfriendly and hostile to one another, filling the abode of our soul with envy, and jealousy, and hostility. We love one of the two, looking on her as someone who is mild and tractable; dear to us and closely connected to ourselves – and this one is called pleasure. The other we detest, deeming her unmanageable, savage, fierce and completely hostile – and her name is virtue. One of them comes to us luxuriously dressed in the guise of a harlot and prostitute, with mincing steps, rolling her eyes with excessive licentiousness and desire. She entraps the souls of the young, looking about with a mixture of boldness and impudence, holding up her head and raising herself above her natural height, fawning and giggling, having the hair of her head dressed with the most superfluous elaborateness, her eyes shaded with pencil, her eyebrows covered over, enjoying incessant warm baths, painted with a fictitious colour, exquisitely dressed with costly garments, richly embroidered, adorned with armlets, and bracelets, and necklaces, and all other ornaments which

> can be made of gold, and precious stones, and all kinds of female decorations.

This woman, a figment of Philo's demented imagination, was depicted by him strolling proudly in the company of her many friends, and full to the brim with bold cunning, rashness, flattery, tricks, deceit, telling lies, crazy opinions, impiety, injustice and intemperance. She was right there in the middle of them, like the leader of the company, marshalling her team, promising them that if they stuck with her, they would receive a share in the treasury of human blessings.

Philo the philosopher focused his mystic mind on the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. According to him, God had fashioned his prized creature on the sixth day, observing that the number six was, by the law of nature, the most productive number. Adam was the perfect creature, made to reflect the image and likeness of God. From the beginning, man was a pure spirit – a mind living in isolation in Paradise, in a garden free of disease and corruption. But creation was by nature changeable. Nothing lasted forever. When the creator distinguished between the sexes, transforming his original prized creature into male and female, he set in train a process of trouble and strife. Adam rejoiced at the sight of his Eve and took her in his arms. He was superior because God had given him the dominant feature in humankind's make-up, namely the mind, the soul, while Eve had been endowed with sensations. The experience of pleasure was associated with these female sensations and they clouded and overpowered Adam's mind. The serpent had concluded that the way to Adam was through Eve. By nature, she was unstable and fickle – more prone to evil than her male counterpart.

One of the more outrageous character assassinations of Lady Eve was penned by this Jewish philosopher from Alexandria. His frequent references to the original *femme fatale* were sprinkled with

damning observations about women in general He saw Eve as the beginning of all man's troubles. She was the root-cause of all sexual passion, and because of her husband's powerful sexual drive, humankind has had to suffer. She ruled over death, and over all vile and putrid things. By her nature she had been less honourable than her partner. Adam had sinned by surrendering his birthright as lord and master when he had become subordinate to someone inferior; from the beginning women were meant to be subordinate and submissive to their menfolk. According to Philo, since Eve had come from Adam, women enjoyed only a secondary ontological status, and while Adam had been made in the image and likeness of God, his partner had been two steps removed from that immortal image.

Both Josephus and Philo were contemporaries of Paul and living in the same theological world as him. The myth of Adam and Eve was at the forefront of their minds, ready to be taken up to advance their worldview. Along with other figures in Jewish literature and folklore (Cain and Abel, Noah, Moses and Abraham, to mention a few), the Adam-and-Eve myth made the crossing from the world of Judaism into Christian territory.

As far as we know, unlike Paul, Jesus had not ventured into the dangerous territory of women's fashions. In preaching his kingdom message, he didn't need to waste time on such trivia. Paul, however, did not hesitate and again co-opted the myth of Adam and Eve to lend support to his pastoral stand. He was intent on establishing his churches on a firm foundation and on making sure, as far as he could, that the members were on their best behaviour in foreign lands.

Further on, in his first letter to the Corinthians, after he had dealt with the issues around sex and marriage, Paul addressed another problem which was causing some distress (1 Cor 11:2–16). Apparently, some of the female members of the community were displaying their glorious hairstyles on the public streets and in the

prayer assemblies. Paul was determined that their lewd behaviour had to cease. He and others considered it was not proper for a woman to address God with her head uncovered. Only hussies and prostitutes let their hair down in public or put their hair up to attract attention and titillate their potential customers. Ladies didn't parade themselves in this way outside the home. They kept their eyes down, mouth shut, and head covered when out and about, and when at prayer in the assembly.

In Paul's time Corinth was a busy seaport and a major commercial centre – a densely populated, cosmopolitan and wealthy city – a maze of narrow streets and laneways where merchants from near and far set up their stalls. She was a city of debauchery, profiteering and eastern cults. And she also boasted a strong Jewish presence as well as a rainbow range of religions and sects from Asia Minor such as followers of Isis, Cybele, Serapis, and Aphrodite of course.

By reputation Corinth was a steamy town populated by foreigners and sailors, pimps and prostitutes. The priestess-prostitutes who spent their lives in the temple service of Aphrodite were reputed to spread their graces and blessings wide and far so that the resulting pox was popularly called 'the Corinthian disease'. Sex was a popular pastime even inside Paul's churches. Some Christians who had crossed over from pagan cults were mingling with believers of Jewish background, including factions that were fighting to preserve their Jewish traditions and beliefs.

In their former lives, some members of the Christian community would have participated in the activities of other religious sects and perhaps to some degree were still involved – in mystery cults, for example. They would have regularly eaten meat offered in sacrifice to idols. Some would have seen women leading the worshippers in prayer and behaving outrageously, as though under the influence of drugs. Paul's community was made up of men and women, married, single, widowed and virgins – all

performing a variety of functions. There were apostles, prophets and prophetesses, those who 'spoke in tongues', teachers, preachers as well as simple followers – some behaving badly, even at the memorial of the Lord's Supper.

The Christian community in Corinth would have reflected the social and economic make-up of the city – the wealthy and poor, tradesmen and artisans, freed people and slaves, Jewish sympathizers and Judaizers, converts from the mystery cults and those from a Hellenistic background, pimps and prostitutes. This local community included libertines as well as extreme puritans. And there were disturbances, conflicts and chaos. According to Paul, some members of his little church were fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, sodomites, thieves and drunkards – all eminently suitable, on standards established by Jesus, to apply for membership of his Kingdom but badly suited to be members of an established organisation trying to make its way in the world.

Some of these characters with shadowy pasts had to be brought into line. Some of the more conservative members of the community were unhappy. Paul knew how he wanted his people to behave, but he couldn't just tell them. He had to argue his position.

Beginning with a play on the word 'head' – which could mean either a leader, a person in charge such as the head of a department, or the upper part of the human body – drawing on his training as a Pharisee, Paul developed an artificial rabbinical argument by exploiting the double meaning of the word. He juxtaposed man, woman, Christ and God in order to strengthen a theological proposition which some readers might have found unconvincing.

He wanted his readers to know that as far as male members were concerned, Christ was the head (the leader), that a husband was the head (the leader, the boss) for his wife, and that God was the head (the leader) for Christ. All a perfect model for a traditional patriarchal system. Paul was accepting the prevailing culturally determined gender relationship between man and woman.

> I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor 11:3).

Without exploring this idea further, Paul seems to have assumed that his readers would simply accept what he was saying. It was obvious. The husband was in charge. Then he followed his now-puzzling statement involving 'heads' with what we might regard as a complete *non-sequitur*. Any man who prayed and prophesied with his head covered, dishonoured his head (his leader), referring to Christ. When a man prayed or prophesied with his head covered, he appeared to be hiding from Christ instead of allowing his open face to reflect the glory of his leader (2 Cor 3:18). With his head covered, a man would be behaving improperly, like a woman. He doesn't need to have his head covered. He is the one with the authority.

On the other hand, every woman who prayed or prophesied with her head uncovered was an affront to her head, that is to her husband, because she had removed the sign of her husband's control over her. Covering her head was the symbol of her submission and subjection. Appearing in the liturgical gathering without a head covering would indicate she was her husband's equal, an independent woman no longer under his control. As we see in verse 10, Paul thought that a woman's veil was the sign of her subjection and the sign of her husband's authority: 'That is why a woman ought to have a veil (in Greek: authority) on her head, because of the angels' (1 Cor. 11:10).

Whenever a woman was wearing a headscarf or a veil she was licensed to pray in the assembly because she was displaying the authority which came from her husband. She knew her place and was prepared to acknowledge it by wearing the veil.

Presumably, both parties, male and female, were licensed to pray and prophesy in public, but when the woman did, she had to

be veiled. According to Paul, and exaggerating a little, if a woman refused to wear a veil, she should 'go the whole hog', shave her head and appear like a harlot, covered in shame and disgrace. These observations would have flowed naturally from what Paul and others were used to seeing in the streets of cities like Corinth.

And there followed another now-apparent *non-sequitur* but which, when seen in the light of the author's training in the Pharisaic school of Gamaliel, seemed so obvious. A man should not cover his head because he is 'the image and glory of God'. This is a reference to the Genesis myth of God creating his prized creature, Adam. A woman however was the glory of the man because, also according to Genesis, a man was not made from woman. The woman had been created from man – Eve from Adam – but not the inverse. 'For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man' (1 Cor 11:8–9).

Then he added a puzzling observation. A woman had to wear a veil on her head 'because of the angels'. We'll come back to this reference to angels, but whatever he meant, it included a commitment to proper order and decorum at all times in the assembly. Cultural standards of dress should prevail in order to preserve man's authority over his woman.

Paul continued with his ponderous argument in favour of female veiling. As far as the Lord was concerned, women were not independent of men, or men independent of women. At the time of creation, a woman was born from a man. Eve came from Adam, while now men are born of women. The lives of men and women are intertwined. And in any event, as Paul added, 'all things are from God'.

In truth, Paul only had to issue the directive that in the assemblies women had to be veiled if they wanted to pray or prophesise. But he had to justify his regulation and argue his case. Have another look at his convoluted thought process:

> But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonours her head – it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil. For a man ought not to cover his head , since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.) That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels. (Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.) Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her pride? For her hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God (1 Cor 11:3-1).

The convolution of his ideas came out of the rabbinical world which Paul had inhabited as a young man. It was the result of his years of religious training. To persuade his people in Corinth that God wanted women to be veiled and socially acceptable when they were praying, Paul based his argument on the opening chapters of Genesis and the divinely established relationship between Adam and Eve as reflected in the Torah. How convinced the Gentile people of Corinth were by this mode of argumentation can be left to our imagination.

With these off-the-cuff observations involving our first parents, and their theological significance, Paul was taking up a

motif that had become popular in Jewish literature and dominant in the Jewish religious psyche, and introducing it into early Christian thinking. It was destined to dominate the minds of bishops and theologians, Fathers and Doctors of the church for almost two thousand years, until in recent times people of faith reluctantly ceased believing that Adam and his companion had been real, historical figures rather than the product of a storyteller's fertile dreaming. Our first parents were mythical figures embraced by our ancestors and given centrestage in the story of creation. Now Paul was exploiting the story to justify rules about women's dress code and their inferior status.

His reference to Adam and Eve was to put a light to a long fuse which would begin to sparkle in the Pastoral Epistles and eventually light up a virile Christian misogynistic tradition. This Genesis story would be used to prosecute the central role of women in humankind's tragic unhappiness and in the emergence of cosmic chaos; to classify women as temptresses and the cause of sin in the world, with special emphasis on the enjoyable sin of intercourse; to explain the spread of original sin by copulation; and to establish Satan's power over the emotional and unstable members of the opposite sex.

The Adam-and-Eve myth would become a rich theme to be embellished and exploited by Church Fathers like Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine, explored and expanded down the centuries in what became known as the Adam-and-Eve literature. Anonymous authors would dream up crazy variations of the story involving the original couple and recount the expanded story in lengthy Latin, Gaelic, French, German or English poems and legends. The influential scholastic theologians (Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, for example) were fascinated by our first parents, by the Genesis story of their creation and their tragic fall from grace.

In Paul's mind, and as we saw also in Philo's mind, there were two types of women. For Paul, they were divided into those who were properly veiled in public (those with their feminine glory

hidden under a scarf when they were praying in the assembly) and the second category was comprised of jezebels, harridans and tarts. A woman was either dressed properly or she wasn't, and if she wasn't, she might as well be totally bald for the affront she was offering her husband and the community. Such a woman was a disgrace.

While the apostle Paul did not share Philo's explicit misogynistic ideas about women, and while these same sentiments were certainly not part of Jesus' thinking, within a few decades they would become a feature of the way leaders of the Christian communities would write and preach about women.

But returning to his argument in support of the veiling of women, Paul invited his readers to use their common sense and to judge for themselves. He said nature made it obvious that it was degrading for a man to wear his hair like a girl, round his ears and over his shoulders. While for a woman, long hair was her pride and glory. A woman's hair was created as a head covering. That's the way God had intended that men and women should present themselves – men with short hair, women with long, glorious hairstyles covered by a veil. Paul believed the natural way established by the creator from the beginning should be preserved. Societal customs should be honoured. Christians should not appear to be different. Paul was insisting on order and conformity within his communities.

Finally, by way of conclusion and again unlike Jesus, Paul simply laid down the law. He told the Corinthians that this was the way it was going to be. If any of them didn't like it, if any one was disposed to be argumentative, they would either have to accept his regulations or leave the community. Paul didn't recognize any other practice. All his other churches agreed that women had to be veiled when praying or prophesying in public. Corinth had to fall into line. 'If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God' (1 Cor 11:16).

So what can we make of what Paul wrote on this issue of women's fashions?

First, it appears to have been the norm in Corinth and in the other Pauline churches for both men and women to pray publicly and to prophesy. In the assembly, at least during Paul's time, women could do what men did. They were licensed to assume an active, public role in the liturgical gatherings. They enjoyed a new authorisation. While Christians of Jewish origins would not have been accustomed to women performing these functions, and while they would have expected the women present to remain silent and separate, in Christian circles women could participate, and actively.

However, women who were moved to participate had to be veiled, and as Paul said, the veil was their authorisation to participate. 'This is why a woman ought to have an authority or an authorisation on her head, because of the angels' (1 Cor 11:10).

The meaning of this verse is not immediately obvious. What was Paul thinking? For some obscure reason, angels were being introduced into his discussion. Obviously, Paul (and presumably his readers) knew something about angels which escapes the modern reader.

The reference may simply have been to messengers, to the visitors from other churches who would have been expecting the Corinthian church to be like all the others, with the female members demonstrating their respect and their subjection to their husbands and to the community by being veiled in the assembly. The Greek word *angelos* was commonly translated as 'a messenger' and on this hypothesis, the visitors would have reported their impressions of Corinth back to their own churches.

On the other hand, Paul might have had real angels, heavenly creatures in mind, and if this be true, there are two possible interpretations of what Paul meant.

First (and by way of background), Plato reported in his *Apology* that Socrates had developed some idea of a private inner voice which would warn him of danger, a guiding spirit which he called his *diamonion* and which would have been something like

a guardian angel. The Essenes at Qumran believed that angels hovered in the air when the members of the group were together in worship. They were observers and supervisors of the created world, charged with the task of governing the world, preserving reverence and ensuring a level of order in the assembly. Worshippers were engaged in promoting God's glory – and that glory alone had to pervade the religious experience. There was to be no distraction. According to Paul, God's glory was symbolised by man's uncovered head whereas, since a woman was man's glory, and her hair was her own glory, during worship her head had to be covered with a veil to preserve order and decorum. A tortured argument which may not convince a modern reader, but Paul was talking to the members of his little first-century church community in Corinth. Today his arguments might ring hollow, but he was reasoning like a rabbi.

Second (and parallel with the popular myth of Adam and Eve, of the serpent and the fruit tree) there was another creation story involving a tribe of angels (also called 'watchers'). One hundred and ninety-nine of them had been struck by the blinding beauty of the daughters of men, had descended to earth, fornicated with these gorgeous girls and had begotten a race of giants, of Titans and supermen. Women were required to wear a head-covering in the assembly to protect themselves from rampant, sex-starved angels who were tormented by lustful demons.

We can find relics of this myth in the book of Genesis (6:1–4), but the story was told in more detail in the first book of Enoch, and particularly in the *Testament of Reuben* which was part of a Jewish-Christian document called the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. In his testament the Patriarch Reuben was imagined addressing his sons, warning them of the dangers of the fair sex. The text was known in some form to the author of the Epistle of Jude (1:14–15), and probably Paul had come in contact with the story in his early studies, though the final version of the Testaments was not complete until the second century of this era.

> For thus they (the well-endowed but showy daughters of man) allured the Watchers (the angels) who were before the flood; for as they continually stared at them, they lusted after them, and they conceived the act in their mind; for they changed themselves into the shape of men, and appeared to them when they were with their husbands. And the women lusting in their minds after their form gave birth to giants, for the Watchers appeared to them as reaching even unto heaven (4:1 & 5:1–7).

Paul wanted to insist that women should wear headgear in public and at community worship. After-all, at the time it was the prevailing custom in Corinth and elsewhere, both among Gentiles and Jews. To have done otherwise, to tolerate adult women appearing in public without their headwear would have made the Christian movement like a group on the fringe of society, and the women themselves like harlots or hippies. Paul wanted his communities to appear part of society – serious, substantial, properly ordered and well controlled, not unhinged like some of the popular mystery religions.

In order to buttress his pastoral position, and like any trained theologian, Paul was calling on every trick in the book. He was arguing from every angle. He was throwing everything at his readers – Genesis, Scripture, nature, common sense, and the final punch – authority.

Traditionally, this has been how theology develops. Arguments have often been confected, like the arguments marshalled by the church in Rome in defence of her policy on female ordination or against artificial birth-control. Arguments in support of a basic pastoral position often emerged from the way a particular culture thought, from the fashions of the times, from typology, for example, or from what was described by the scholastics as *convenientia*, or from the mystery of numbers, from literal interpretations of some mythological or poetic passage. In the end, arguments come and go,

moving in and out of fashion. The practical, pastoral position was what was important to preserve, namely, order, harmony, orthodoxy and peace, and it was preserved by considerations that varied from age to age.

In his first letter to his brothers and sisters in Corinth, Paul had released the myth of Adam and Eve from its cage, setting it free to roam in the dense forest of Christian literature. He had enlisted the ancient fable to buff and polish his pastoral policy that women were naturally inferior to men and that somehow the biblical story of Adam and Eve was related to the status of women within the community. A woman had arrived late on the creation scene, after Adam. She had been born from his flesh and created as his companion. Consequently, women were the glory of their husbands. They were secondary, subservient and inferior.

Later, when he dictated what Christians came to refer to as his second letter, he penetrated further into the shadows of the myth and, leaving to one side any role the male partner might have played in the tragedy, Paul simply asserted that a cunning serpent had deceived the woman.

Paul felt himself consumed with a 'divine jealousy'. He saw his position and authority in Corinth being undermined. People were speaking ill of him, boasting about themselves and Paul wanted to defend himself: 'But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor 11:2).

There is the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent in the forefront of Paul's mind – an image and an argument ready for him to use so spontaneously.

We can be confident from reading his letters that Paul was not a woman-hater of any colour. Nowhere in his authentic letters can be found a poisonous word addressed to any woman or about women, abusing or demeaning them as some of the Fathers would later do. He had many female, as well as male, companions

and regarded them all as his co-workers. He engaged on a daily basis with women, accepted their hospitality, enjoyed their company, greeting them in his letters (sometimes affectionately) and accepting that they could pray and prophesy in the liturgical assemblies. He regarded his female companions as important members of his team. He does not appear to have been frightened or dismissive of women in general and certainly did not speak disparagingly of them.

While Paul was clearly an alpha male figure in the early church, thin-skinned and somewhat paranoid, he was still able to work with women and acknowledge their contribution to the mission he had set himself – to preach the message of salvation which Christ had accomplished by his death and resurrection and to establish communities of believers throughout the Greco-Roman world. And he was not loath to express his emotions – his affection for his fellow workers, men and women.

Nonetheless, he believed women were inferior to men. They were the descendants of a woman who had been created for Adam, after Adam and from his sleeping body. They were the glory of their husbands and needed to know their place and show submission to their husbands in all things, except maybe in the bedroom. He wanted his church members to be accepted as part of the mainstream, and this meant that Christian women had to behave themselves properly in public places and within the faith gatherings. They had to dress modestly and not present themselves like madams and flighty street women. Women had to conform to the standards of society.

Paul showed himself to be patriarchal, chauvinistic and somewhat anti-feminist – not a radical revolutionary like Jesus, but a social conformist who was intent on preserving order, authority, established structure and the social norms.

From what we can divine, from comparing what Jesus is reported as saying and what Paul wrote in his letters, the apostle

of the Gentiles was more cerebral than Jesus, more intellectual, more ideological, and more strategic. The thought-patterns he had acquired in the school of Gamaliel where he had learnt his theology, would determine how he would argue a case and muster his points of reference. He did not write as Jesus tended to speak. He did not preach in parables, or talk to his churches about his dreams and visions of a kingdom or a world which was not predicated on power or wealth. He did not speak to his audience in aphorisms and puzzling epigrams as Jesus had done. Paul tended either to deal with practical, immediate issues of pastoral concern, or else with grand theological questions about God and his plan, about salvation, liberty and the law, death and resurrection. And in dealing with both of these areas, the practical and the ideological, he drew on his knowledge of the Bible, on the myth of Adam and Eve, on his traditions and on what he considered reasonable, appropriate, obvious and in accordance with the prevailing culture norms. His letters show his mind working both as a practical administrator of an expanding organisation, and as a man with formal education trained in law and theology to argue a case. Jesus was not a lawyer or a theologian who was interested in mounting an argument based in Scripture' or tradition, to defend a pastoral decision or a theoretical teaching. He was more down to earth, more grounded in the moment.

But it is plain from comparing the Gospel narratives and the letters of Paul that Jesus had never talked like Paul the theologian. No twisted rabbinical arguments to justify a ruling or support a practice. Jesus was not an academic or a professionally trained teacher. He spoke simply, directly, in homespun parables, without frills and flourishes, without torturous analogies or sinuous pleadings. But it didn't take long before his Kingdom message was on the wane and Paul was in the ascendency.

The relationship which Jesus had enjoyed with his female followers and with other women, and the role they had played in

his life and mission, were not replicated in the life and mission of the early communities. None of the apostles seem to have followed Jesus' lead. The female atmospherics within Acts, and for that matter within Paul's letters, are of a different order to those pulsating throughout the Gospels as the authors described the life and work of Jesus.

Faced with the profile of women in the early apostolic churches, their involvement in Paul's missionary work and their prominence in the house churches spread around the Mediterranean communities, it is a shock to come across a number of passages in his authentic letters which provided both practical and theological grounds for the subordination of women within his churches: the headship of man over women in the hierarchical structure of God – Christ – man – woman.