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## Early Christian prophetesses in the New Testament

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## Abstract

### *Early Christian prophetesses in the New Testament*

This article presents a characterization of several women identified explicitly in the New Testament as prophetesses: (1) Philip's daughters in Acts 21:9; and (2) the prophetesses in the community in Corinth mentioned in 1 Cor 11:5. The article highlights the historical and theological context of their activity and defines the content and object of Christian prophecy. The presentation of these two groups of prophetesses points out the major exegetical problems presented by the text and contemporary attempts to resolve them.

**Keywords:** prophetesses, Acts 21:9, 1 Cor 11:5, 1 Cor 14:34–35

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## Abstrakt

### *Wczesnochrześcijańskie prorokinie w Nowym Testamencie*

Artykuł prezentuje charakteryzację kobiet, które w Nowym Testamencie określone są explicite jako prorokinie: (1) córki Filipa w Dz 21, 9 oraz (2) kobiety-prorokinie we wspólnocie w Koryncie z 1 Kor 11, 5. Autor zwraca uwagę na historyczny i teologiczny kontekst ich działalności oraz definiuje treść i przedmiot chrześcijańskiego prorocтва. W prezentacji każdej z dwóch grup kobiet wskazano na najważniejsze problemy egzegetyczne i współczesny próby ich rozwiązania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** prorokinie; Dz 21, 9; 1 Kor 11, 5; 1 Kor 14, 34–35

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The New Testament contains four texts that explicitly point out women prophetesses. The first is Luke 2:36, presenting the figure of Anna. The second is the reference in Acts 21:9 to the prophesying daughters of Philip the Evangelist. The third one, 1 Cor 11:5, indicates the existence of prophetesses within the community at Corinth. The fourth, of a different sort altogether, is the mention of the prophetess Jezebel in Revelation 2:20.<sup>1</sup>

This article's focus is on women prophetesses functioning within Christian communities, and for this reason we will omit, first, the person of the prophetess Anna, who still belongs to the economy of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Her presence in the Jerusalem Temple at the time of the presentation of Jesus, the Messiah, serves as an announcement of the outpouring of the gift of the Spirit on "all flesh" in the Messianic era, including women (Joel 2:28 [3:1]; Acts 2:17). Using his characteristic prolepsis, Luke presents her as the progenitor of the Christian prophetesses. We will also omit the presentation of Jezebel from Revelation 2:20, since she is a decidedly negative figure, an anti-example of Christian prophecy. Indeed, her status as a prophetess is negated by the statement: "Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess" (2:20). The author of Revelation unequivocally suggests that Jezebel is not a prophetess. Interestingly, in the New Testament, it is only in the cases of Anna and Jezebel that the noun *προφῆτις* 'prophetess' is used (Luke 2:36; Rev 2:20); the daughters of Philip and the Corinthian prophetesses are described using other forms of the verb *προφητεύω* 'to prophesy' (see, however, 1 Cor 14:29,32, where *προφῆται* 'prophets' applies to both men and women). If the sign of being a prophet is being filled with the Holy Spirit and uttering words coming from God, including words revealing the mysteries of the present and/or

1 F. Scott Spencer, *Out of Mind, Out of Voice: Slave-Girls and Prophetic Daughters in Luke-Acts*, "Biblical Interpretation" 7 (1999) Issue 2, pp. 133–155, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851599X00065>; Author perceives the fulfillment of the prophecy of slave women in Acts 2:18 in three texts: Luke 22:56; Acts 2:14–15; 16:17. However, it isn't easy to classify these texts as dealing explicitly with early Christian prophecy.

2 The Old Testament mentions four prophetesses: Miriam—sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22) and Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3). Rabbinical writings, e.g. Talmud (*b. Meg.* 16a) and midrashes (Gen. Rab. 67:9; 72:6), add matriarchs (e.g., Sarah—Gen 17), but also Anna (1 Samuel 1), Abigail (1 Samuel 25) and Esther. The false prophetess is Noadiah (Neh 6:14).

future, then the title ‘prophetess’ might equally be applied to Elizabeth (Luke 1:41–45), as well as to Mary (the Magnificat in Luke 1:46–55 meets the criterion of prophetic text, including its reference to the future). Nevertheless, we will deliberately omit the presentation of these two women, successive prophetesses prefiguring (again, Luke’s prolepsis) the charism of prophecy commonly present among the members of the Church. This decision, again, is dictated by the article’s precise subject of interest: the presence of prophetesses in early Christian communities (Elizabeth, like Anna, belongs to the OT economy, while Mary stands astride on the boundary between two eras of salvation history, arguably belonging to both of them).<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this article, then, is limited to the daughters of Philip the Evangelist and the women of the Church in Corinth, the criterion for our choice being the ecclesial context, i.e. that these women are members of the early Church of apostolic times. By looking at them, we want to gain insight into the early Christian phenomenon of prophecy among women. Therefore, we will present briefly the characterization of these women and various related exegetical problems, including present-day attempts in pursuit of solutions to them. The order in which we discuss the two texts, Acts 21:9 and 1 Cor 11:5, follows the canonical order of the NT books, and not any chronology of the emergence of these New Testament writings. In fact, we may reasonably suppose that 1 Corinthians, written by Paul, predates the Acts, written by Luke, Paul’s disciple.

## 1. Daughters of Philip the Evangelist

In the Acts of the Apostles we read about Philip, said to have four daughters who were prophetesses (21:8–9). He is presented as one of the seven deacons of the Church in Jerusalem (6:1–6), best known for his mission among the Samaritans (8:5–25) and the evangelization of a high official

<sup>3</sup> As for Mary, there is already enough literature dealing with her prophetic identity. Cf. N. Clayton, A. E. Connor, *Mantic Mary? The Virgin Mother as Prophet in Luke 1.26–56 and the Early Church*, “Journal for the Study of the New Testament” 34 (2012) Issue 3, pp. 254–276; D. B. Stinton, *Mary of Nazareth: A Prophetic Voice Calling through the Centuries*, “Crux” 56 (2020) no. 4, pp. 10–20. See also Joseph Ratzinger’s text *Mary as Prophetess*, in: J. Ratzinger, H. U. von Balthasar, *Mary. The Church at the Source*, San Francisco 2005, pp. 70–75.

of the Ethiopian queen (8:26–40). Philip, along with other deacons, is described as a man of “good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:3). His evangelizing activity is marked by the clear presence of the Holy Spirit, who even takes him to Azotus (8:40). However, this ministry under the influence of the Spirit is not limited to Philip himself, whom we can confidently describe as an early Christian prophet,<sup>4</sup> but extends also to his daughters, as they are called “prophesying virgins” (παρθέναι προφητεύουσαι – 21:9).

Joel’s prediction (2:28 [3:1]) about the prophesying daughters (mentioned in Acts 2:17) here becomes a reality. Daughters prophesying in the wake of their father’s prophetic activity corresponds to the ancient paradigm, in which children’s activity mirrored the activity or profession of their parents. In a culture that places honor on a pedestal, this appropriate behavior of the daughters adds to the respect and reverence conferred upon Philip, confirming and justifying the father’s status as an “evangelist” and leader of the local community of believers. Philip, who in his ministry experienced the crossing of ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries (Ethiopians, Samaritans), likewise traverses the gender barrier: prophetic activity also becomes the lot of women.<sup>5</sup>

The term “virgin” certainly means that these women were not yet married (thus assuming their actual virginity), although it may also simply point to their young age. However, is a relationship implied here between virginity and the prophetic gift, as in the case of the Pythian priestesses and prophetesses in Apollo’s Delphic sanctuary (Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi* 22 [Moralia, 405C]; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 10,12,6; Lucian of Samosata, *The Lover of Lies or the Doubter*, 38; *Astrology*, 23)? Further, does the mention of “virgins” refer to their status as “virgins” understood as a distinguished group in the early Church, as

4 See R. Strelan, *The Running Prophet* (Acts 8:30), “Novum Testamentum” 43 (2001) fasc. 1, pp. 31–38. See also the whole chapter *The Acts of Philip: A Charismatic Deacon* (8.1–10), in: R. Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology*, Cleveland 2010, pp. 87–91. For more about Philip, see F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts. A Study of Role and Relations*, Sheffield 1992; T. Yamanaka, *Philip, a Collaborative Forerunner of Peter and Paul. A Study of Philip’s Characterization in Acts*, Rome 2022.

5 C. Keener, *Acts. An Exegetical Commentary*. Volume 3: 15:1–23:35, Grand Rapids 2014, pp. 3093 and 3090, footnote 1434.

referred to in 1 Cor 7:1.8–9.25–38 or the later apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla 7?<sup>6</sup> There are three arguments in favor of a negative answer in both cases: (1) the existence of prophetesses among the Corinthian women (1 Cor 11:5), who presumably would have included both unmarried and married women (see 1 Cor 14:35 in the context of 14:29–37); (2) the figure of Priscilla, who, being married, teaches Apollos (Acts 18:26); (3) Anna the prophetess, who is a widow that had lived with her husband for seven years from the time of her virginity (Luke 2:36).<sup>7</sup> Instead, Luke’s remark on the virgin status of Philip’s daughters may reflect an interest, on the part of the first generations of Christians, in the ideal of virginity, discernible as early as the writing of 1 Cor 7 and, somewhat later, in Acts.<sup>8</sup>

However, the above three arguments presenting the existence of married women prophetesses may suggest that the mention of the virginity of Philip’s daughters, indicating their maiden life (and therefore still staying at home with their father, Philip), simply serves to emphasize their young age. Craig Keener noted that the Mishnaic definition of “virginity” essentially indicates an age below puberty. (In Palestinian Judaism, a girl was married between 12 and 18; rabbinical texts indicate an age of twelve and a half.) In this light, Philip’s daughters may

6 Darrell L. Bock (Acts, Grand Rapids 2007, p. 637) considers that the title “virgins” here means “pious social status”.

7 Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. AD 212) in *Stromata* 3.52.5 states that not only was Paul the apostle married, but the daughters of Philip the Evangelist were also married. This opinion of Clement is also quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Historia Ecclesiae* 3.30), who, in his work, identifies Philip the deacon with Philip the apostle. As noted by Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiae* 3.31; pp. 5:24), in the opinion of Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus (d. AD 195), at least one of Philip’s daughters “lived in the Holy Spirit” (ἐν ἁγίῳ πνεύματι πολιτευσαμένη). She was buried in Ephesus, while two others—explicitly described as virgins who have reached old age—are buried with their father in Hierapolis. Eusebius also cites the opinion of the Montanist Proclus, who claimed that Philip’s four daughters, prophetesses, lived, died, and are buried (together with their father) in Hierapolis. Some interpret Polycrates’ note about a daughter who died in Ephesus as indicating the status of a married woman. See B. W. Bacon, *The Authoress of Revelation—A Conjecture*, “Harvard Theological Review” 23 (1930) No. 3, p. 235. More information on this subject is provided by P. Corssen, *Die Töchter des Philippus*, “Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche” 2 (1901), pp. 289–299. Philip, along with his daughters, may have left Caesarea to settle in Hierapolis in Phrygia, perhaps due to ethnic tensions in former city that presaged the anti-Roman uprising which broke out there in AD 66. Cf. C. Keener, Acts, p. 3088.

8 C. Keener, Acts, p. 3088, footnote 1415.

have been teenagers or even prepubescent girls.<sup>9</sup> Luke discloses that the charism of prophecy was not limited to men but was also exercised by women, following Joel's prediction recalled by Peter on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:17–18).<sup>10</sup> That oracle of Joel also mentions “young men” (οἱ νεανίσκοι – Joel 3:1 [2:28]; Acts 2:17), however, thus we cannot rule out that Luke here simply highlights the young age of Philip's daughters, especially in contrast to the old (or at least significantly older) prophet Agabus mentioned in the immediate context,<sup>11</sup> and to the aged widow, the prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36–37).

The use of the present participle προφητεύουσαι (‘prophesying’) suggests persistence, continuation, and customary practice. It can also indicate a function or ministry in the community rather than an office or position.<sup>12</sup> As Marek Karczewski put it: “It can therefore be assumed that these are four young unmarried women who had the constant ability to utter prophecies.”<sup>13</sup>

According to commentators, the lack of the noun “prophetess” or “prophetesses” to describe Philip's daughters results from Luke's reserving this term for a particular group of prominent and older prophets (Acts 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 21:10) who also functioned as the community leaders (13:1; 15:22.32). It would therefore be inappropriate to call such young

9 C. Keener, Acts, p. 3101. Adopting a (hypothetical) interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:36–38 as a text about fathers and virgins, Craig Keener (Acts, p. 3101) suggests that the virginity period of Philip's daughters would be prolonged for “promoting spiritual maturation.”

10 Robert M. Price (*The Widow Traditions in Luke-Acts: A Feminist-Critical Scrutiny*, Atlanta 1997, pp. 64–71) elaborates an argument based in part on *The Testament of Job* 46–51 (three prophesizing daughters of Job) that the daughters were responsible for the prophecy.

11 Craig Keener (Acts, p. 3091, footnote 1444) argues: “We may assume that Agabus is at least not young, on the basis of the span of years that have passed since Acts 11:27–30 (at least in Luke's narrative world, if some would move Agabus's prophecy at that point instead to the later collection).”

12 C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Edinburgh 1998, p. 994. Craig Keener (Acts, p. 3091) considers such a distinction (ministry versus office) anachronistic early in the Church's existence.

13 M. Karczewski, *Prorocy chrześcijańscy w Dziejach Apostolskich. Prorocy i prorocstwo chrześcijańskie w kontekście literackim Dziejów Apostolskich*, in: „Bóg jest miłością” (1 J 4,16). *Studia dla Księdza Profesora Józefa Kudasiewicza w 80. rocznicę urodzin*, ed. W. Chrostowski, Warszawa 2006, p. 190.

girls prophetesses.<sup>14</sup> However, the suggestion that these women were leaders of the Church in Caesarea<sup>15</sup> does not seem convincing. In Acts 13:1–3, only male “prophets” are mentioned as managing and teaching in the Church in Antioch. A similar picture emerges from the entire Book of Acts.<sup>16</sup>

Eckhard J. Schnabel believes that the mention of Philip’s four daughters “prophesying” is probably intended to emphasize the involvement of these women in the life of the community of believers in Caesarea.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Luke Timothy Johnson believes that the present participle “prophesying” serves as a means of identifying these women precisely.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Hans Conzelmann speculates that they may have been well-known in the early Church.<sup>19</sup> This last conclusion can be confirmed by the text of Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. 3.39.9), who quotes information from Papias (a contemporary of Philip’s daughters), who in turn claimed to have heard from these prophetesses a moving testimony about the resurrection of a dead person, which took place in Philip’s time.

The American exegete Gail O’Day believes that the absence of any specific prophecy (about the apostle Paul, or anything else) made by the four prophetic daughters, while the prophecy of Agabus (21:10) is reported in detail, emphasizes the role of the male protagonists and diminishes the status of the four women.<sup>20</sup> A similar situation is described in Luke

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14 B. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 662; C. Keener, *Acts*, p. 3091. Luke, therefore, does not deny them this title because of their gender (see Anna in Luke 2:36) but because of their age and role in the Church.

15 In this way E. E. Ellis, *The Role of Christian Prophet in Acts*, in: *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, eds. W. W. Gasque, R. P. Martin, Exeter 1970, p. 55–56.

16 Cf. J. Słomka, *Prorocy chrześcijańscy I–II wieku*, “*Studia Religiológica*” 39 (2006), p. 9–21.

17 E. J. Schnabel, *Acts: Expanded Digital Edition*, Grand Rapids 2012, *ad loc.*

18 L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville 1992, p. 370.

19 H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, Minneapolis 1987, p. 178.

20 G. O’Day, *Acts*, in: *Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition with Apocrypha*, eds. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, Louisville 1998, p. 397. Scott Spencer (*The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles*, Nashville 2008, *ad loc.*) put it: „Overall the women of Acts remain safely contained in conventional boxes”. Already Origen (*Frag. 1 Cor. 74*) believed that they prophesied only in private and not public contexts. John Calvin also embraced this notion. As Jerome notes (*Ep. 108.8*), his own faithful disciple, Paula, was shown in Philip’s house at Caesarea a room (*cubiculum*) in which they were said to prophete-



2:25–28, where the presence of Anna, the woman prophetess, is reported, but the content of the prophecy of the man, Simeon, is quoted.<sup>21</sup> However, Beverly Gaventa rightly points out that there is no implied rivalry between groups of prophets or individual prophets in the narrative of Acts 21.<sup>22</sup> The juxtaposition of the prophet Agabus with the four prophetesses does not have to signify adherence to the convention of patriarchal culture (men over women), or even the depreciation of women in contrast to the exaltation of men. Instead, it may be an allusion to the literal fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy about both sons and daughters prophesying (Acts 2:17). (Of course, the simplest explanation is that Luke was realistically reporting the facts: it was Agabus who made this prophecy, not Philip’s daughters.) According to Craig Keener, mention of the four daughters, juxtaposed with Agabus—besides adding honor and praise to Philip as a good father, and thus worthy of the title of “evangelist”—actually introduces gender balance to the narrative. The American exegete offers a series of arguments for emphasizing the prophecy of Agabus as a climax of prophetic warnings addressed to Paul, without any desire to diminish the role of Philip’s daughters due to their sex. These arguments include Agabus’ more advanced age, his prominence (his famous prophecy of a great famine in Acts 11:28–29), his much wider geographic ministry (e.g., Judea, Antioch), and the dramatic, symbolic prophetic action (binding himself with a belt) akin to the deeds of the Old Testament prophets, which would certainly attract the attention

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sy. Remarks of this type are anachronistic because, at this stage in the history of the Church, communities always met (except for the temple in Jerusalem) in a domestic and private context. These home communities, indeed, were called “churches.” In this vein, Craig Keener (Acts, p. 3093, footnote 1456) states: “The suggestion that the women prophesied only in «non-church» gatherings [...] is difficult to sustain, given the issue of head coverings, the appeal to angels (1 Cor 11:10) and appeal to other churches (11:16), and especially the fact that the church was meeting in homes, so that Christian meetings there de facto constituted «church».”

21 R. I. Pervo, *Acts. A Commentary*, Minneapolis 2009, p. 537. More R. I. Pervo, (Acts 21:9) *Four Unmarried Daughters of Philip*, in: *Women in Scripture*, ed. C. Meyers et al., New York 2000, pp. 467–468.

22 B. R. Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Nashville 2003, s. 294. Ivoni Richter Reimer (*Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*, Minneapolis 1995, p. 249) argues that opposition to women “had begun as early as the end of the first century, but there is no trace of it in Acts 21:8–9.”

of those present and, in turn, of Luke's audience. Moreover, Agabus's prophecy is also quoted for geographical reasons: he comes from Judea (and therefore Jerusalem), and his prophecy refers to events that are to take place in Judea/Jerusalem (21:11). Since Philip's daughters may have been among those warning Paul against going to Jerusalem, in opposition to God's plans (21:12), "reporting their words would not in itself honor them".<sup>23</sup> In this context, Johann Albrecht Bengel's (1697–1752) ahistorical interpretation sounds a bit naive, even humorous, or, as Charles Barrett diplomatically puts it, "more interesting": *Philippus evangelista: filiae prophetantes. propheta major est, quam evangelista (Eph. 4:11)*. Indeed, Paul in Ephesians 4:11 lists the ministry of the prophet before that of the evangelist. Bengel seems to imply that the daughters have surpassed the father.

The absence of any quoted prophetic content uttered by Philip's daughters is seen by Frederick Bruce as a sign of the historical credibility of Luke's work. Bruce argued that Luke is a reliable historian and not a romancer: in the context of mentioning four prophetesses, Luke "could hardly have let slip the opportunity of putting some appropriate words into their mouths."<sup>24</sup> However, Charles Barrett speculates that the four virgins may not have been in Caesarea during Paul's stay and for this very reason their prophecy is not quoted.<sup>25</sup> The mention of Philip and his daughters, without attributing any deeds or words to them, may also be a sign that these people served Luke as a source of information about the Church in Caesarea.<sup>26</sup>

Marek Karczewski draws attention to another interesting detail: "It is significant that as many as four of Philip's daughters prophesy, which confirms the universal availability of salvation."<sup>27</sup> Karczewski probably points to the number four, commonly understood in antiquity as symbolizing universality, based on the notion of four geographical directions.

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<sup>23</sup> C. Keener, *Acts*, p. 3092.

<sup>24</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Grand Rapids 1988, p. 400.

<sup>25</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, p. 994 ("that he [Agabus] makes the prophecy suggests that the daughters were in the Itinerary").

<sup>26</sup> B. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 663.

<sup>27</sup> M. Karczewski, *Prorocy chrześcijańscy*, pp. 190–191.

## 2. Prophetesses in the Pauline Churches

**What does it mean to prophesy?** Paul in 1 Cor 11:5 speaks of women praying (προσεύχομαι) and prophesying (προφητεῦω) during public (i.e., cultic, liturgical) gatherings of believers in Christ. They do this on an equal footing with the men mentioned earlier, who are also praying and prophesying (11:4). Defining women's prayer in this context, its three elements should be stressed: (1) it was aloud (not silent), (2) it was public (not private), and for this reason, (3) it might be connected with leading the congregation. The immediate literary context indicates that this prayer "must be more than silent prayers offered in the separated women's section of the synagogue-church."<sup>28</sup> As David Garland aptly noted: "Were it only some private gathering among the family or among only women, their attire would not have been an issue."<sup>29</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer argued that the verb προσεύχομαι means "praying aloud to God, possibly even as a leader of the gathering in a house-church."<sup>30</sup> The same three aforementioned characteristics of prayer might be applied also to prophetic activity. The verb προφητεῦω is understood in 1 Cor as conveying to the community or to individuals words coming from God (inspired by the Holy Spirit). These can take the form of preaching, giving insight into spiritual mysteries (apocalyptic dimension) and into the "secrets of the heart" (14:25). They are based on Holy Scripture ("charismatic exegesis" or creative reinterpretation, providing the so-called *sensus plenior* of the biblical text), they may refer to the past and/or present and/or future, and they have a pastoral dimension (consolation and/or conversion and/or change and/or admonishment). Prophecy is not a permanent property or capacity (not a charism on demand) and should be subjected to examination (the "false prophet" issue).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> W. F. Orr, J. A. Walther, *I Corinthians. A New Translation, Introduction with a Study of the Life of Paul, Notes, and Commentary*, Garden City 1976, p. 260.

<sup>29</sup> D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Grand Rapids 2003, p. 518.

<sup>30</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, New Haven 2008, p. 412.

<sup>31</sup> An excellent résumé of contemporary exegetical debates on the New Testament understanding of prophecy are two excursions in A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids 2000, pp. 956–965 and 1087–1098. One of the definitions quoted by him (p. 964) seems to be highly accurate: "prophecy, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, combines pastoral insight into the needs of persons, com-

According to 1 Cor, prophecy is one of the ways of spiritual “building” (οικοδομέω) (14:4) of the community, which—according to 14:3—contained three elements: οικοδομή (‘edification’, ‘upbuilding’, ‘strengthening’), παράκλησις (‘rejuvenating’, ‘exhortation’, ‘encouragement’), and to some extent παραμυθία (‘consolation’, ‘comfort’). The gift of prophecy is considered extremely useful for the community because, thanks to it, the members can “learn” (μανθάνω) (14:31). Interestingly, in the hierarchy of charisms and ministries in the Church, Paul places prophets above teachers (Rom 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12:29; Eph 4:11). Only the apostle is above the prophet. The great authority of prophecy in the early Church is confirmed by the formula associated with the prophecy of Agabus: “Thus says the Holy Spirit” (Acts 21:11). The participation of women in the ministry of prophecy undoubtedly translated into their high status in the community of the Church, within the larger patriarchal society.<sup>32</sup>

**Prophetess and headgear.** According to Paul, women are to pray and prophesy with their heads covered and men with their heads uncovered (1 Cor 11:4–7). Indeed, this function for women was a break with synagogue practices well known to Paul, in which women were not allowed to speak in public.<sup>33</sup> If the prayer meetings in question were for women only, or if they were limited to family members only, then the issue of women’s clothing, specifically whether the head was covered or uncovered, would not be worth mentioning. In asking women to cover their heads, Paul suggests that a private home should be treated as a public place during meetings of the Church community, including prayers and the celebration of the Eucharist.

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munities, and situations with the ability to address these with a God-given utterance or longer discourse (whether unprompted or prepared with judgment, decision, and rational reflection) leading to challenge or comfort, judgment, or consolation, but ultimately building up the addressees.” A group of exegetes emphatically argue that prophecy is only a spontaneous, unprepared utterance containing the truth received from God. Cf. D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids 1983; W. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament Today*. Revised Edition, Wheaton 2000.

<sup>32</sup> This is the main emphasis of the study by A. C. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, Minneapolis 1990.

<sup>33</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, p. 413.

Thus, Paul takes it for granted that women actively participate in worship, provided they cover their heads. It should be emphasized, however, that Paul, recalling the obligation to cover the head (women) or uncover it (men), draws a clear difference between women and men – without, however, doing away with the doctrine of gender equality (see Gal 3:28). In short, gender equality does not negate the existence of gender difference. The blurring of gender differences, however, hurts the honor of women as well as men and was found at odds with the theology of creation.<sup>34</sup> In the case of women in Corinth, in the context of the culture of the time, an uncovered head meant sexual “openness.” As a result, it is hard to imagine Paul’s leniency in a situation where a woman prophesying or praying in public, instead of directing attention to God, became the object of sexual desire for congregation members.<sup>35</sup>

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza believes that the reason for Paul’s warnings was the loose hair of women, symbolizing their prophetic-charismatic power, and a sign of their ecstatic anointing with Spirit-Wisdom. Thus, Paul wants to counteract prophetic madness and orders the hair to be tied.<sup>36</sup> This hypothesis is based on the parallels visible in the loose and uncombed hair of women serving in the cults of Dionysus, Cybele and Isis, and the Pythian priestesses in the temple of Apollo at Delphi. However, as Christopher Forbes has demonstrated, these parallels are anachronistic for the Roman colony of Corinth in the first century AD.<sup>37</sup>

34 Cf. M. Kowalski, *Changing Gender Roles and the Unchanging Message of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16*, in: *The Word of Truth, Sealed by the Spirit. Perspectives on the Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture*, eds. M. C. Genung, K. Zilverberg, Saint Paul 2022, pp. 130–136.

35 It is possible that the reason for Paul’s warnings in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 was an identification of gender equality with gender identity (the absence of gender differences). Cf. J.-M. Gundry-Volf, *Gender and Creation in 1 Cor 11:2–16. A Study in Paul’s Theological Method*, in: *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche*, Hrsg. J. Adna, S. J. Hafemann, O. Hofius, Göttingen 1997, pp. 151–171. A related problem resulting from the blurring of gender differences, as Paul mentions, was the shame (κατασχύνω) that such women brought to themselves (1 Cor 11:5), to God (11:7–12), to their husbands or other legal guardians (e.g., father), or more broadly, to their families. Both of the above reasons are discussed extensively by A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 829.

36 E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York–London 1983, pp. 230; cf. also pp. 226–230.

37 C. Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment*, Tübingen 1995, p. 227; A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 830–831. For more on female prophets from the perspective of archaeology and non-biblical

**Prophetess: married woman or unmarried virgin?** There is a difference of opinion among commentators on the meaning of the term *γυνή* in 1 Cor 11:5. The lexeme *γυνή* used here can mean both “woman” (as in 14:34–35) as well as “wife” (as in 7:16). The semantics of this term is essential in the context of the ancient idea of linking virginity with the gift of prophecy (e.g., the Delphic pythoness, the Sibyl, the Muses) and contemporary attempts to view the early Christian prophetesses as unmarried virgins. There are several arguments in favor of seeing women praying and prophesying in public as married women. These arguments, however, can be challenged by concluding that Paul is referring to a woman *per se*, without specifying her status (married, virgin, widow, divorced, etc.).

First, the immediately preceding context undoubtedly speaks of wives, using the same term *γυνή* (cf. 11:3), since women are here mentioned in contrast to men. This argument is not convincing because the text speaks of “every man” (*παντὸς ἀνδρός*), implying all men, including both “husbands” and “men” as such.

Secondly, the immediately following context also seems to limit the word *γυνή* to wives, as it refers to their relationship with men, as exemplified by Adam’s marital relationship with Eve (11:6–12). On the other hand, the reference to Genesis in this passage of Paul’s argument need not presuppose the husband-wife relationship, as it may well be understood as referring, again, to women and men *per se*.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the context of Paul’s argumentation in 11:2–16 concerns the differences between men and women generally, without narrowing the addressees of the letter to husbands and wives.<sup>39</sup>

Thirdly, the text we are interested in (11:5) discusses women wearing head coverings. Some form of headgear was the custom in Greek and Roman cultures for married women who were away from home (Plutarch, *Mor.* 232C, 267A).<sup>40</sup> Within the Jewish cultural circle, an identical rule

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ancient literature, see J. E. Marshall, *Women Praying and Prophesying in Corinth: Gender and Inspired Speech in First Corinth*. *Gender and Inspired Speech in First Corinthians*, Tübingen 2017, pp. 43–71, 109–156.

38 A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 832.

39 For more on this subject, see M. Kowalski, *Changing Gender Roles*, pp. 107–143.

40 Horace (*Satires* 1,2,80–108) argued that, looking at a married woman (*matrona*), one can only see her face because other parts of her body were concealed by a large robe.

was in force. As David Garland noted: “For a Hebrew woman to go out uncovered was widely regarded as a disgrace (3 Macc 4:6; b. Ned. 30b) because a covered head was a sign of modesty (b. Yoma 47b).”<sup>41</sup> In the case of a married woman, the lack of headgear in a public place could be sufficient reason for divorce, including the husband retaining his wife’s dowry (m. Ketub. 7:6; b. Ketub. 72a; cf. m. B. Qam. 8:6). This argument does not seem to be valid, however, since a head covering in public characterized both married and unmarried women, regardless of the context of Greco-Roman or Jewish culture (see Philo, *Spec.* 3:56; b. *Nedarim* 30b).<sup>42</sup>

Fourth, the primary argument for understanding γυνή in 11:5 in a broader sense, i.e. a woman *per se* (including the married), is the expression πᾶσα δὲ γυνή (“every/any woman”) used in this verse. The phrase suggests a broader understanding: married and unmarried women, including widows.<sup>43</sup>

In conclusion, the arguments presented above support the understanding of the term γυνή in 1 Cor 11:5 in a broad sense, i.e. as gender (“woman”), without reference to marital status.

**The prophetess: publicly silent or speaking?** The focal passage of 1 Cor 11:5 seems to stand in stark contradiction to another text of Paul in

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Pliny the Younger (*The Epistulae* 19,4) mentioned with satisfaction that his wife listened to his works in public hidden behind the veil (*discreta velo*). Livia, the wife of Emperor Augustus, was presented with a head covering as an official model of piety and virtue. After M. Kowalski, *Changing Gender Roles*, p. 129.

<sup>41</sup> D. E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, p. 520.

<sup>42</sup> G. J. Lockwood, 1 Corinthians, Saint Louis 2000, p. 366 (“There is ample testimony that in general it was customary in Paul’s day for both Jewish and Greek women to wear head-coverings in public”). Marcin Kowalski (*Changing Gender Roles*, p. 129) argues: “Covering the head with a veil or hood signified a respectable female status. [...] A head without cover was a sign of promiscuity and sexual availability. According to Philo, a woman accused of adultery was to be judged without a head covering, a symbol of modesty (*Spec.* 3.56).” Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities* 3,270) also mentions the priest removing a woman’s head covering on trial for adultery.

<sup>43</sup> More arguments for seeing wives and husbands in 11:2–16 are presented by A. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple. A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19,12–13 and 1 Cor 11,3–16*, Uppsala 1965, p. 175. Some authors see here an intended ambiguity (*double entendre*). See F. Zerbst, *The Office of Women in the Church*, Saint Louis 1955, p. 34; B. K. Waltke, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. An Interpretation, “*Bibliotheca Sacra*” 138 (1978) no. 537, p. 51; H. W. House, A Biblical View of Women in the Ministry. Part 2: Should a Woman Prophesy or Preach Before Men?, “*Bibliotheca Sacra*” 145 (1988) no. 578, pp. 152–153.

the very same letter, that is, his prohibition of women from speaking and asking questions in the public assemblies of the Church (14:34–35). The relationship—and apparent discrepancy—between 11:5 (women do speak) and 14:34–35 (women should be silent) has been explained in several ways, which we summarize below.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, this issue is essential to resolving the dispute between commentators who limit prophecy to the private sphere and those who suggest that women prophesied in the public assemblies of early Christian communities.

(1) Many authors consider verses 14:34–35 to be a later interpolation, and, as Paul's inauthentic words, these verses should be omitted.<sup>45</sup> This hypothesis, however, has no basis in the *critica textus*. (2) The first text (11:2–16) belongs to an earlier letter, and the second (14:34–35) was written later, when Paul's views on women's participation in assemblies had changed.<sup>46</sup> (3) The first text expresses Paul's views, while the second reflects a Corinthian position that the apostle does not share.<sup>47</sup> (4) The first text deals with the right of women to pray and prophesy in the private sphere, while the second is prohibition of their speaking and prophesying in public gatherings.<sup>48</sup> (5) The first text refers to women speaking in assemblies in an organized manner. In contrast, the second prohibits women from disrupting the assemblies with their chatter, babble, constant talk, or frenzied shouting that drowns out the words of prayer or prophecy uttered by another person.<sup>49</sup> (6) The first text dealt with the issue

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44 I am following here the *status quaestionis* elaborated by A. D. Baum, *Pauls' Conflicting Statements on Female Public Speaking* (1 Cor. 11:5) and *Silence* (1 Cor. 14:34–35): *A New Suggestion*, "Tyndale Bulletin" 65 (2014) Issue 2, p. 248–251. Another detailed *status quaestionis* provides A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 1150–1162.

45 P. B. Payne, *Ms 88 as Evidence for a Text without 1 Cor 14:34–35*, "New Testament Studies" 44 (1998), pp. 152–158. David E. Garland (*1 Corinthians*, p. 665, footnote 17) lists 22 authors advocating this solution.

46 D. Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, Göttingen 2010, p. 447.

47 D. W. Odell-Scott, *Let the Women Speak in Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b–36*, "Biblical Theology Bulletin" 13 (1983), pp. 90–93; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Interpolations in 1 Corinthians*, "Catholic Biblical Quarterly" 48 (1986), pp. 90–92; D. W. Odell-Scott, *Editorial Dilemma: The Interpolation of 1 Cor 14:34–35 in the Western Manuscripts of D, G and 88*, "Biblical Theology Bulletin" 30 (2000), pp. 68–74.

48 A. Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu*, Stuttgart 1956, s. 389–390; P. Bachmann, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, Leipzig 1921, pp. 424–425.

49 K. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, Downers Grove 2011, p. 416.



of women's head coverings (a woman must wear one in order to speak), whereas the second emphasizes a hierarchical order governing the relationship between a man and a woman (a woman must have the man's permission to speak). The first text is for the more progressive domestic church, the second for the more conservative community. However, one principle informs both texts: a woman (wife or leader) cannot speak in public without the permission of a man, understood as her husband and/or a community leader.<sup>50</sup> (7) The first text affirms the right of women to prophesy, while the second forbids them from expounding publicly upon the prophecies, especially wives passing judgment upon the prophecies spoken by their own husbands, which would bring shame and humiliation to the men themselves.<sup>51</sup> (8) The first text affirms women's right to public prayer and prophecy in church assemblies, while the second forbids them from asking irrelevant and time-wasting questions. Being less educated, women could indeed ask many such questions, disturbing the order of the assembly and inadvertently initiating long discussions. Paul therefore encourages them to ask these questions privately, in their homes. Moreover, a wife who publicly disagreed with her husband's opinion would bring shame and dishonor to such a husband.<sup>52</sup> (9) The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in the document *Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture* (2014), identifies the motives for Paul's command as (a) respect and (b) harmony between spouses and (c) order in the assembly.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the issue of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the case of the dignity and proper order of the assemblies (14:30.33.40) is at the center of Paul's attention in the text of 1 Corinthians. It is possible that

<sup>50</sup> A. D. Baum, *Pauls' Conflicting Statements*, p. 274 ("female public speaking without male consent is unacceptable whereas female public speaking with male consent is unobjectionable").

<sup>51</sup> D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit. A Theological Exposition of 1 Cor 12–14*, Grand Rapids 1987, pp. 128–132; A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 1158 and 1160; P. D. Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ed. C. E. Arnold, Grand Rapids 2018, p. 637 (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament).

<sup>52</sup> C. Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther. Teil 2: Auslegung der Kapitel 8–16*, Berlin 1982, pp. 344 and 346 (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament, 7); C. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives*, Grand Rapids 1992, pp. 80–88; C. Forbes, *Prophecy*, pp. 273–277; T. R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians. An Introduction and Commentary*, Downers Grove 2018, p. 297.

<sup>53</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture*, § 133.

Paul here is not prohibiting women from speaking (including prophesying) *per se*, but rather is focusing on women's behavior that could be offensive, humiliating, and embarrassing to their husbands and legal guardians (e.g., fathers). It would be uncomfortable, in fact humiliating, for husbands to witness the judgment of their prophecy by their wives, as well as to be questioned by their wives in public. It would be equally demeaning to a husband should his wife ask questions of a male stranger in a public setting.<sup>54</sup> The same *principium* should be applied to any relationship between a woman and her legal guardian (e.g., daughter-father). Paul clearly distinguishes between two aspects of women's behavior, assigned to two different spaces: the community of the Church (ἐκκλησία) and the community of a private home (οἶκος).

## Conclusion

The New Testament, especially in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, bears clear witness not only to the participation of women in the mission of preaching the Gospel (e.g., Acts 18:26; Phil 4:2–3)<sup>55</sup> but also to their use of the charism of prophecy to build early Christian communities. The latter role of women is explicitly mentioned twice in the New Testament writings. In Acts 21:9, Luke mentions four prophesying daughters of the deacon Philip, and in 1 Cor 11:5 Paul writes about prophesying women in the community of Corinth.

The most critical exegetical problems the reader encounters regarding Philip's prophesying daughters are: (1) their relationship to their father, the prophet (according to the customs of the time, they perform the father's "profession" and bring him pride), (2) their status as virgins (unlike the Greco-Roman culture, early Christian prophecy did not assume virginity), (3) their young age (this contrasts with the elderly prophet

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54 R. E. Ciampa, B. S. Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids 2010, pp. 722–727; M. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, Nashville 2014, pp. 360–361. See also J. Greenbury, *1 Corinthians 14:34–35: Evaluation of Prophecy Revisited*, "Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society" 51 (2008), pp. 721–731; E. Hiu, *Regulations Concerning Tongues and Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:26–40: Relevance Beyond the Corinthian Church*, London 2010, pp. 147–150.

55 Cf. A. Kubiś, *Kobiety głoszące Ewangelię w Nowym Testamencie*, "Polonia Sacra" 26 (2022) no. 3, pp. 7–28.

Agabus and is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy quoted in Acts 2:17–18), and (4) the connection between prophecy and the status of the community's leaders (only men were leaders). As Paul's letters show (see 1 Cor 14:29–30), prophecy is not directly related to leadership.

Paul's mention of women prophetesses (1 Cor 11:5) occurs in the context of the instruction on head coverings. Paul imposes this requirement on women, following the customs of the time, confirming that prophecy was a public act performed in the community. In Paul's rhetoric, the required headgear emphasized the difference between the sexes (without negating their equality), in line with the theology of creation contained in Genesis 1–2. The second important observation concerns the marital status of the Corinthian women prophetesses. Only in pagan cults (the Delphic Pythias) was prophecy associated with virginity. The context of Paul's statement clearly indicates that the text is about women as such, both married and unmarried. The third crucial exegetical issue concerns the command of women to be silent (1 Cor 14:34–35), which seems to deny their right to speak in public, including prophecy. Paul's chief concern, however, is that any woman prophesying publicly behave so as not to discredit her husband, father, or other legal guardian. The famous tension between the text about women speaking (1 Cor 11:5) and the command of women to be silent (1 Cor 14:34–35) should be seen through the lenses of the problem of discipline or due decorum during community prayer meetings (see 1 Cor 14:30.33.40). The command of silence is best understood as a ban on specific public statements that could offend or humiliate men (husbands, fathers, brothers, legal guardians), which, in the context of the prevailing patriarchal culture, could destroy the due order of assemblies. These forbidden public utterances by women include evaluating prophecies and asking questions.

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