

Does περιβόλαιον Mean “Testicle” in 1 Corinthians 11:15?

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1 Corinthians 11:2–16 remains one of the most perplexing passages in the interpretation of Paul, and persuasive attempts to understand what Paul is talking about are at a premium.¹ The logical difficulty at the heart of the passage is well known. Paul appears to argue that a woman should veil her head while praying or prophesying, but he then goes on to suggest that her hair is given to her for a covering (11:15). Under such circumstances, provocative new interpretations of elements in this passage demand special attention. Troy Martin’s recent article, focusing especially on 1 Cor 11:15, opens up a new and intriguing possibility, that περιβόλαιον here means “testicle.”²

The verse in question reads: . . . ὅτι ἡ κόμη ἀντὶ περιβόλαιου δέδοται αὐτῇ. Martin says that this is usually translated: “For her hair is given to her instead of a covering.”³ He argues that the translation of περιβόλαιον should be “testicle,” thus:

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¹ For a recent article on the passage, with extensive bibliography, see Preston T. Massey, “The Meaning of κατακαλύπτω and κατὰ κεφαλῆς ἔχων in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,” *NTS* 53 (2007): 502–23.

² Martin, “Paul’s Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13–15: A Testicle instead of a Head Covering,” *JBL* 123 (2004): 75–84. Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Anchor Yale Bible 32; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008], 421) describes Martin’s proposal as “completely far-fetched” but does not explain how he came to this conclusion. Christopher Mount (“1 Corinthians 11:3–16: Spirit Possession and Authority in a Non-Pauline Interpolation,” *JBL* 124 [2005]: 313–40), on the other hand, thinks that Martin’s proposal is “persuasively argued” (p. 333).

³ Martin, “Paul’s Argument,” 76. Martin cites Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983),

“For her hair is given to her instead of a testicle.” Martin’s contention is that Paul is here assuming ancient attitudes to the body, according to which hair is “part of the female genitalia.”⁵ He explains:

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

Informed by the Jewish tradition, which strictly forbids display of genitalia when engaged in God’s service, Paul’s argument from nature cogently supports a woman’s covering her head when praying or prophesying.⁶

Martin has written on ancient medical language and the NT before,⁷ and his exposition of ancient attitudes to sex and gender is intriguing. In order for the new interpretation of this passage to be established, however, it is necessary to look at the lexical basis for identifying περιβόλαιον as “testicle.” Unfortunately for Martin’s argument, the lexical case is weak. He offers two texts to illustrate that the word was used in this way.⁸ The first is from Euripides, *Herc. fur.* 1269.⁹ Martin asserts that Euripides here “uses περιβόλαιον in reference to a body part,” and he translates the passage thus: “After I received [my] bags of flesh, which are the outward signs of puberty, [I received] labors about which I [shall] undertake to say what is necessary” (ἐπεὶ δὲ σαρκὸς περιβόλαι’ ἐκτησάμην ἡβῶντα, μόχθους οὖς ἔτλην τί δεῖ λέγειν). Martin adds, by way of explanation: “A dynamic translation of the first clause would be: ‘After I received my testicles (περιβόλαια), which are the outward

227–28, to establish that this is the usual translation, but in fact it is unusual. Practically all major contemporary translations have “for a covering” (NRSV, ESV [English Standard Version], NASB, NIV, NET Bible). For a study of the translation of ἀντί, see Alan G. Padgett, “The Significance of ἀντί in 1 Corinthians 11:15,” *TynBul* 45 (1994): 181–87.

⁵ Martin, “Paul’s Argument,” 79, 80, 83, 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷ See Martin, “Paul’s Pneumatological Statements and Ancient Medical Texts,” in *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune* (ed. John Fotopoulos; NovTSup 122; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 105–28; and *idem*, “Whose Flesh? What Temptation? (Gal 4.13–14),” *JSNT* 74 (1999): 65–91.

⁸ Martin, “Paul’s Argument,” 77.

⁹ For the Greek text, see Euripides, *Hercules* (ed. Kevin Hargreaves Lee; Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana; Leipzig: Teubner, 1988); and for the text with introduction and commentary, see Godfrey W. Bond, *Euripides Hercules: With Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

signs of puberty.’ In this text from Euripides, the term περιβόλαιον refers to a testicle.”¹⁰

Martin does not give any indication that the translation he is proposing is controversial and unparalleled. There are important problems with it, not least his strange translation of ἔτλην as future rather than aorist (first singular aorist indicative active, from τλάω) and the choice not to translate τί as an interrogative, elements that might warn the reader that something is awry in Martin’s translation. But what is most important for Martin’s case, “testicle” is an incorrect translation of περιβόλαιον. The relevant phrase is σαρκὸς περιβόλαι’ ἡβῶντα, where ἡβῶντα (present participle of ἡβάω, “to attain puberty, to be in the prime of youth”) is a transferred epithet agreeing with περιβόλαι(α), “that which is thrown around, covering, clothing” (plural).¹¹ The phrase is naturally construed as “youthful clothes of flesh,” “youthful garb of flesh.” Martin is right that youth and adolescence are in view here, but his literalistic reading misses the point that Euripides is simply using a clothing metaphor.¹² Heracles has come of age and has put on his young man’s flesh. It is not a reference to “a body part.” On the only other occasion that Euripides uses the word περιβόλαιον (*Herc. fur.* 549), it is again used in the plural and with a similarly metaphorical meaning, this time with reference to the “garb of death.”¹³

The clothing metaphor is picked up in all published translations of the passage, none of which is referenced by Martin. Thus, Theodore Alois Buckley (1850) translates, “But when I obtained the youthful vesture of flesh, what need is there to tell the labours I endured?”¹⁴ Likewise, Robert Browning (1875) has, “But when I gained the youthful garb of flesh, The labours I endured, what need to tell?”¹⁵ E. P.

¹⁰ Martin, “Paul’s Argument,” 77.

¹¹ Martin’s clunky translation of ἡβῶντα as “which are the outward signs of puberty” probably derives from a lexical leap, misapplying the fourth meaning for the verb ἡβάω listed in LSJ, “to have the outward signs of puberty.”

¹² See Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides Herakles* (2 vols.; Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), 2:258: “Den leib als kleid anzusehen, ist eine aus orphischen kreisen stammende metaphor,” citing Pindar, *Nemean* 11.15 (θνατὰ μεμνάσθω περιστελλων μέλη); Empedocles 402 (*σαρκῶν χιτῶνα*); and Euripides, *Bacchae* 746 (*σαρκὸς ἐνδυτά*). See also Bond, *Euripides Heracles*, 384: “flesh is regarded as a cloak as at *Ba.* 746.” Bond suggests that “there are philosophical undertones,” also citing Empedocles and Pindar, and adding a reference to Plato, *Phaedo* 87c, where Cebes “likens the soul to a weaver who wears out a succession of cloaks (bodies).”

¹³ *Herc. fur.* 548–49

Ἡρακλῆς: κόσμος δὲ παιδῶν τίς ὄδε νεπτέροις πρέπων;
Μεγάρα: θανάτου τὰδ’ ἤδη περιβόλαι’ ἀνήμμεθα.

¹⁴ *Tragedies of Euripides*, literally translated with critical and explanatory notes by Theodore Alois Buckley of Christ Church (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), 35.

¹⁵ Browning, *Aristophanes’ Apology: Including a Transcript from Euripides Being the Last Adventure of Balaustion* (London: Smith, Elder, 1875), 312.

Coleridge (1938) translates, “After I took on a cloak of youthful flesh . . .,” and Arthur Sanders Way (1896) similarly has, “Soon as I gathered vestures of brawny flesh, What boots to tell what labours I endured?”¹⁶ The most recent English translation (2002) paraphrases a little but still retains the sense common to all the others, “Once the sturdy flesh of youth had clothed my limbs, need I tell of the labours I endured?”¹⁷

The phrase is never translated the way Martin suggests.¹⁸ His unusual translation, “After I received [my] bags of flesh, which are the outward signs of puberty . . .,” appears to construe *σαρκὸς περιβόλαι* as “bags of flesh”; *ἡβῶντα* is translated by the clause “which are the outward signs of puberty.”¹⁹ Even in this literalistic translation, *περιβόλαι* itself could not mean “testicles”; it is the phrase as a whole that would have to be taken to convey the necessary meaning. The word *περιβόλαια* cannot do this work in isolation. Thus, where Martin subsequently suggests, in his “dynamic translation,” that *περιβόλαια* indicates “testicles,” this is misleading. Even on Martin’s reading, “testicles” cannot be conveyed by the word *περιβόλαια* alone.²⁰

Paul, in contrast to Euripides, has *περιβόλαιον* alone. Not only is the associated phrase from *Herc. fur.* absent, but *περιβόλαιον* is singular, which requires Martin to translate “testicle,” singular. The oddity of the expression “instead of a testicle” is itself an indication that the suggested translation is problematic.

Martin provides one other text to illustrate the alleged usage, Achilles Tatius and his erotic romance *Leuc. Clit.* 1.15.2. Martin’s discussion in full is as follows:

¹⁶ Euripides, *The Complete Greek Drama* (ed. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill, Jr., in two volumes) vol. 1, *Heracles* (trans. E. P. Coleridge; New York: Random House, 1938); Arthur Sanders Way, *The Tragedies of Euripides in English Verse* (London: Macmillan, 1896), 410.

¹⁷ *Heracles and Other Plays: Heracles, Iphigenia, Among the Taureans, Helen, Ion, Cyclops* (trans. John Davie; introduction and notes by Richard Rutherford; Penguin Classics; London: Penguin, 2002), 41. See also Euripides, *Herakles* (trans. Tom Sleight; introduction and notes by Christian Wolff; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): “When I grew up, My arms and legs were sheathed in muscle Tight-woven as a herdsman’s cloak—but why go over All those labours I endured?” (p. 83); and Euripides, *Four Plays: Medea, Hippolytus, Heracles, Bacchae* (ed. Stephen J. Esposito; Focus Classical Library; Newburyport, MA: Focus/R Pullins, 2002): “And when I attained the cloak of a vigorous body, what need is there to mention the toils I endured?” (p. 197). Similarly, *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, vol. 3, *Euripides* (ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 287–343.

¹⁸ Everyone except Martin takes this as a question, reading *τί* as an interrogative.

¹⁹ See n. 11 above.

²⁰ Martin is, to some extent, aware of the difficulty, adding, “Some may interpret Euripides’ statement as referring to the scrotum, but the plural *περιβόλαια* more likely refers to the testicles rather than the scrotum (*ὄσχη*), which is singular” (“Paul’s Argument,” 77 n. 7). This admission is telling because of the use of singular *περιβόλαιον* in 1 Cor 11:15. See further on *ὄσχη* below.

Achilles Tatius (*Leuc. Clit.* 1.15.2) plays on this meaning of περιβόλαιον in his erotic description of a garden in which Clitophon seeks an amorous encounter with Leucippe. Achilles Tatius describes the entwinings of the flowers, embracings of the leaves, and intercourses of the fruits (αἱ τῶν πετάλων περιπλοκαί, τῶν φύλλων περιβολαί, τῶν καρπῶν συμπλοκαί). He portrays this erotic garden by allusions to male and female sexual organs. The term περιπλοκαί alludes to the female hair, the term περιβολαί to the testicles in males, and the term συμπλοκαί to the mixing of male and female reproductive fluid in the female. Achilles Tatius’s description of this garden associates female hair and the testicle in males.²¹

This passage is also insufficient to establish the desired translation of περιβόλαιον. It is, as Martin points out, an erotic romance, and it is quite possible that Achilles Tatius is intending to evoke sexual intercourse in the choice of imagery in his description of the garden, but the sentence in question does not provide a one-to-one correspondence between items in the garden and items in the human anatomy. The phrase τῶν φύλλων περιβολαί, “the overlapping of the leaves,” is a description of an element in the garden that acts as the backdrop for the encounter of the protagonists. If it had been shown on other grounds that περιβόλαιον sometimes carried the meaning “testicle,” it could perhaps have been argued that the image was specially chosen with this in mind, but this is not the case. It is difficult to argue for a new meaning on the basis of an alleged metaphorical usage. Furthermore, the usage here—once again—is plural, and it makes it a weak precedent for the singular περιβόλαιον in 1 Cor 11:15.

If there is no basis, then, for translating περιβόλαιον as “testicle” in 1 Cor 11:15, it is worth asking what word(s) Paul might have used if he had intended to convey this meaning. The obvious word for Paul to have used would have been ὄρχις. Martin briefly mentions the word in a footnote, where he observes that it can be used for both testicles and ovaries.²² In another footnote, he mentions ὄσχη as meaning “scrotum.”²³ Otherwise, there is no discussion of the alternatives that would have been available to Paul in the alleged unusual usage.

Conclusion

If Paul had wished to contrast women’s hair with male testicles in 1 Cor 11:15, we would have expected him to use a plural noun, and the noun of choice would probably have been ὄρχις. There are no known uses of περιβόλαιον to mean “testi-

²¹ Martin, “Paul’s Argument,” 77.

²² Ibid., 82 n. 31.

²³ Ibid., 77 n. 7. The word κώρυκος can also be used metaphorically for scrotum; LSJ gives *Hippiatr.* 73 as a reference for this.

cle.” The two examples provided by Martin do not make the case. In Euripides, *Herc. Fur.* 1269, the term should be translated in a conventional manner as “vestures” along the lines, “youthful vestures of flesh.” In Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 1.15.2, the term is used of the “overlapping” or “embracing” of the leaves, and an alleged metaphorical usage cannot be the basis for a radical new translation. The interesting ancient medical data may shed light on the kinds of perspectives that Paul and his readers shared with respect to hair, but, in the absence of the necessary lexical basis for the desired translation of 1 Cor 11:15, Martin’s case is not established. There may be good answers to the puzzles thrown up by this passage, but they will not involve translating περιβόλαιον as “testicle.”