

Note

---

## “Such” or “Other”? Options in I Corinthians 11.16

The Bible Translator

2020, Vol. 71(3) 368–372

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/2051677020965672

[journals.sagepub.com/home/tbt](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tbt)**David J. Clark**

Retired Translation Consultant with United Bible Societies and IBT Moscow

### Abstract

This note summarises the different ways numerous translations have rendered the Greek word *toioutēn* in I Cor 11.16, the implications that the different options could have for interpreting the verse, and how readers in various cultures may perceive Paul's attitude towards his original readers.

### Keywords

such, other, *toioutos*, *sunētheia*, I Corinthians 11.16

### Introduction

In I Cor 11.2-16, Paul discusses whether, in Christian worship, people should cover their heads. Is this a theological issue, a cultural issue, or a curious mixture of the two? In vv. 3-4 Paul is presenting essentially theological reasons for his view that women should cover their heads while men should not, but in vv. 5-6, he seems to be taking some cultural presuppositions of his own time and experience as if they are universally applicable. Then in vv. 7-12, he offers more theological reasons for his view, while vv. 13-15 contain more cultural arguments, or rather rhetorical questions based on cultural assumptions.

In v. 16, there is a brief conclusion to the discussion, in which English versions show a significant variation in their renderings. KJV has “If any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.” A similar rendering is found in such English versions as RV, NEB, NRSV, REB, NJB, NKJV, ESV, Knox, and Beck. It is found also in the Latin Vulgate, older Luther editions in German, and the Old Church Slavonic and

---

### Corresponding author:

David J. Clark, 20 Wellington Lodge, 2 Firwood Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 3QD, UK.

Email: [djcgrc@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:djcgrc@hotmail.co.uk)

various versions derived from it or influenced by it in Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, and Bulgarian. In contrast, RSV renders as “If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God.” Similar wording occurs in Moffatt, NAB, NASB, NLT, modern versions in other languages including Norwegian and Swedish, and common language versions in Spanish, French, and German.

The expressions “no such” and “no other” apparently contradict each other, so what is going on? There are three questions to raise here. First, what is the meaning of the Greek word *toioutos*? Second, what “custom” is Paul referring to? Third, what impression of Paul’s attitude towards his readers do the different options create for modern readers?

## The meaning of *toioutos*

The *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (BDAG) devotes almost a whole column to *toioutos* and its occurrences in a wide variety of contexts, all of which carry the meaning of “such” or “similar.” The references include 1 Cor 11.16 as well as other places in this letter (7.28; 16.16). The *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell, Scott, and Jones (LSJ), dealing with classical Greek literature, also has a lengthy entry for *toioutos*, but offers no example of any meaning other than “such.” So, the question remains, why do many translations give the word a different meaning in 1 Cor 11.16?

## What “custom” is Paul referring to?

Verse 16 forms a conclusion to the whole paragraph, in which Paul has argued that women should cover their heads in worship, which probably includes informal worship gatherings in homes as well as more public worship (Ellingworth and Hatton 1994, 211, 213). He supports this view by describing woman’s relationship to man by analogy with man’s relationship to Christ, and Christ’s relationship to God (vv. 3-4). Then in vv. 5-6 he adduces the cultural argument that if a woman’s head is uncovered in worship, it is as though it were shaven. For a woman to have a shaven head was a sign of disgrace in cultures with which Paul was familiar (compare Num 5.18), but as the UBS handbook on 1 Corinthians points out, this is by no means a universal sign of disgrace (Ellingworth and Hatton 1994, 216).

In vv. 7-12 Paul expands his argument in theological terms, his basic reason being that man was created before woman in the Genesis narrative. Then in vv. 13-15, he returns to cultural assumptions of his own time and background. It is interesting to note that, here, Paul is not claiming to make explicit statements of fact, but posing rhetorical questions whose assumed (positive) answers depend on cultural presuppositions. This form of argument may have been convincing to the original readers who shared his background, but

cannot be universally sustained today. Paul almost seems to allow for divergent views in his opening words in v. 13, “Judge for yourselves.” With this in mind, the only answer possible in today’s world to the question, “Does not nature itself teach you . . . ?” is “No, it does not.” This first became apparent to me when I was living and working in Papua New Guinea, where in many ethnic groups, men’s hair and women’s hair both grow naturally in much the same way and to much the same length. In terms of v. 15, a woman’s hair does not cover her head any more than a man’s hair covers his. Thus, in such social contexts, Paul’s culturally based reasoning fails.

So, when Paul says in v. 16 that if anyone wants to argue, “we have no such custom,” is he doing more than recognising that the cultural arguments relevant to his Corinthian readers may not provide universal truths, and consequently need not be universally enforced? In many church traditions it has remained customary for women to wear some sort of head covering, at least in public worship. However, this has sometimes degenerated into wearing deliberately flamboyant and attention-seeking hats or other headwear, which is surely against the principle Paul is expounding in this paragraph! In many other church traditions, the custom has never been enforced, with no obvious adverse moral consequences.

In the light of these considerations, we must return to the question of why so many modern versions translate *toioutos* here as “no other custom” rather than the normal and obvious “no such custom.” I have not been able to trace the origin of this rendering, but it appears that it is based on the assumption that the phrase *toioutēn sunētheian* refers to the quarrelling mentioned in the first part of the verse, rather than to following the principles Paul has advocated in the previous paragraph. In an expanded rendering, it would be “we have no such custom as quarrelling.” This seems to be the majority interpretation nowadays, though in a number of versions (such as NEB, NRSV, NKJV, ESV) it is not entirely clear which meaning is intended.

However, in terms of the syntax of v. 16, this interpretation seems less than convincing, because the first part of the sentence uses a phrase with an adjective (“contentious” in RSV), whereas the second part uses the noun phrase *toioutēn sunētheian*. Is it not more plausible syntactically that this phrase refers back to the entire argument of vv. 3-15 rather than just to the nearest adjective? The general contexts in several of Paul’s letters (for instance, Gal 3-4; Col 2.8-23; Titus 1.7-16) show clearly that there was plenty of doctrinal and ethical debate going on in various churches, so to say that such discussion was not permissible is clearly out of place. The word *sunētheia* is not a common word, and in both its other occurrences in the New Testament (John 18.39; 1 Cor 8.7), it refers unambiguously to religious practices, not to an abstract action like arguing. This seems to favour the interpretation that Paul does not want a practice which, though it can claim some theological support, is derived from current cultural norms, to become

a source of distracting and fruitless argument among his Corinthian readers. The majority of other congregations do indeed choose to follow the custom of women covering their heads in worship, as Paul himself recommends, but it should not be allowed to become a fetish for all churches.

## **What impressions do the different renderings make on readers?**

If we take the rendering typified by RSV, “we recognize no other practice,” then Paul is saying in effect, “I have told you what to do with regard to head coverings for women, and you simply have to do it, whether you like it or not.” He certainly speaks with authority as an apostle, and is not afraid to administer a rebuke where this is called for, as in v. 22 of this same chapter. However, he is also pastorally concerned for the welfare and spiritual growth of the community of believers in Corinth, many of whom were personally known to him, so would not such a rendering give the impression of Paul as domineering and autocratic? If this is the case in English, how much more dictatorial could it sound in other cultures, especially where one has to be very polite in giving instructions to other people?

If, on the other hand, we accept the rendering “no such custom” and interpret it as applying to the views expressed in the whole paragraph, then Paul comes across as having a clear position on head coverings, but also as being flexible enough to recognise that on such a relatively minor matter of Christian practice, his own opinion may not be universally applicable. He has already demonstrated this kind of practical adjustment to varying circumstances in his discussion of eating meat offered to idols (1 Cor 10.14-33; cf. Col 2.8, 16-23). There, too, he called on people to make up their own minds (1 Cor 10.15; cf. 11.13).

## **Conclusion**

Paul, as a Pharisaic Jew brought up in a Hellenistic environment in Tarsus and as a Roman citizen, was by no means trapped in a monocultural background, and could not have been unaware that some religious practices were commendable in specific cultures but not essential to true faith in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ. It therefore seems that the understanding of v. 16 as leaving the options for head coverings open for the Corinthians is to be preferred. In many modern receptor cultures, such an interpretation is also likely to give a more pastoral picture of Paul as a leader who could distinguish the essential from the peripheral in matters of Christian thought and practice.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Norm Mundhenk and Elena Kolyada for their helpful comments on the first draft of this note, not least because they took different views from one another!

## References

- Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. 1999. *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ellingworth, Paul, and Howard A. Hatton. 1994. *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. 2nd edition. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies.
- Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and H. S. Jones. 1996. *A Greek–English Lexicon*. 9th edition with revised supplement. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Abbreviations

BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich 1999 (in References)
Beck	<i>An American Translation</i> , by William F. Beck (NT: 1963)
ESV	English Standard Version (2001, 2016)
KJV	King James Version (1611)
Knox	Translation from the Vulgate, by Ronald Knox (NT: 1945)
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1996 (in References)
Moffatt	Bible, translated by James Moffatt (1926)
NAB	New American Bible (1970)
NASB	New American Standard Bible (1971, 1995)
NEB	New English Bible (1970)
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible (1985)
NKJV	New King James Version (1982)
NLT	New Living Translation (1996)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (1989)
REB	Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV	Revised Standard Version (1952)
RV	Revised Version (1885)