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IS 1 CORINTHIANS 11:3B–15 AN INTERPOLATION?

Abstract

This paper critically examines Timothy Milinovich's thesis that 1 Corinthians 11:3b–15 is an interpolation. Milinovich argues that this passage, along with 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, was added by an anonymous interpolator. The author challenges this view by analyzing the performative structure of 1 Corinthians and the concentric figures within the text. He argues that the passage in question is integral to the letter's overall structure and thematic coherence. The author also addresses the supposed inconsistencies between these passages and other Pauline texts, suggesting that they are consistent with Paul's theology and the role of women in early Christian communities.

Keywords: 1 Corinthians, interpolation, Timothy Milinovich, concentric structure, Pauline theology, early Christian communities, gender roles, textual analysis

This text is a polemic against the view expressed by Timothy Milinovich in his excellent book on the structure of 1 Corinthians.¹ There the researcher cites arguments which,

¹ MILINOVICH 2013.

according to him, prove that 1 Corinthians 11:3b–15 is a passage added to the text of the letter by an anonymous interpolator.² In this way, he returns to the thesis that was previously raised by some scholars,³ but he does so in a slightly different way, seeking arguments mainly by analyzing the concentric structures he identifies in the text of the letter. It is worth noting that in the same place, this author expresses his belief that another controversial passage concerning women, namely 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, is also an interpolation. Although in fact these two passages are structurally related and can be analyzed together, here we will focus only on the former. If its authenticity can be proven, this will sufficiently weaken the thesis that the latter would be an interpolation.

Before presenting Milinovich's argumentation regarding the passage under discussion here, it is necessary to briefly discuss his conception of the performative structure of 1 Corinthians, on which his view of the aforementioned interpolations is also based.⁴ The researcher rightly draws attention to the importance of the oral character of ancient culture, which was manifested, among other things, in the fact that written texts reached their audience "by ear", and thus were not read by them independently, but listened to. This is what Milinovich writes about the recipients of Paul's letter: *They did not read 1 Corinthians – it was performed to them.*⁵ Thus, it can be assumed that the wording of the text and its structure can play an important role for the listeners. The researcher rightly points out that an important element in the structure of the text of the letter are concentric figures, present at different levels of the text's organization. Their material is various types of repetition – mainly lexical and thematic. Milinovich therefore aims to identify them, which he believes will make it possible

² MILINOVICH 2013: 144–152.

³ First of all: COPE 1978; TROMPF 1980; WALKER 1975; WATSON 2000.

⁴ MILINOVICH 2013: 5–8.

⁵ MILINOVICH 2013: 2.

to reconstruct how the original recipients may have heard the letter's text read aloud. The stylistic devices used in the letter would thus be more than just aesthetic embellishments. Indeed, without their identification, the meaning of the text cannot be well read. It is particularly important to take into account the concentric mode of composition of the discourse, for usually commentators treat Paul's letters as linear compositions, which often causes interpretive problems.⁶ Based on such assumptions, Milinovich proposed his conception of the structure of the entire 1 Corinthians letter.⁷ The results of his research can be largely agreed with, while there are also proposed solutions that are worth further discussion. One such debatable issue is precisely the problem of interpolation of the passage discussed here.

Milinovich presents several reasons why he considered 1 Corinthians 11:3b–15 to be an interpolation.⁸ The following text will present the main points of his argument along with polemical remarks.

The researcher rightly sees these passages as part of a longer structure encompassing 1 Corinthians 11:2–14:40. In this part of the letter, the theme of divisions in the Corinthian church is taken up, which are manifested through a certain disorder in the common meetings. The author states that the analyzed passage is a later addition to the text similarly to the passage closing the whole structure of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, also referring to the behavior of women in the church. According to this concept, the anonymous interpolator would have made his additions taking into account the concentric composition of the text.⁹ While this observation could significantly strengthen the interpolation hypothesis in these places

⁶ Cf. TORBUS 2009: 137–231.

⁷ A slightly different proposal for describing the structure of 1 Corinthians in BAILEY 1983 and TORBUS 2023.

⁸ MILINOVICH 2013: 144–152.

⁹ MILINOVICH 2013.

in the letter, on the other hand, it would weaken it in the absence of the possibility of convincing proof that at least one of these two passages is indeed an interpolation. As the discussion of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 shows, the thesis of interpolation of this passage is highly questionable, especially from the perspective of textual tradition research.¹⁰ Indeed, we do not have any manuscript in which both passages are not found. Thus, this would be the first possible and perhaps entirely sufficient objection, at least concerning 11:3b–15, to Milinkovich's thesis, but this issue will not be developed in this text, since the polemic will focus primarily on arguments concerning the structure of the 11th chapter of the letter. Indeed, the first of the arguments that led Milinkovich to accept the interpolation thesis concerns the coherence of the passage 11:2–14:40. The researcher believes that the text is clearer and more coherent without 11:2b–15 and 14:34–35. He first presents a proposal for the structural arrangement of the passage, which seems to him possible if we include both passages in the text. According to the researcher, the structure would then have to look as follows (ABCD // D'C'B'A):

- A – 11:2–16 // A' 14:26–40 (sex and order)
- B – 11:17–34 // B' 14:14–25 (no significant lexical connections)
- C – 12:1–13 // C' 14:1–13 (no significant lexical connections)
- D – 12:14–31a // D' 12:31b–13:13 (no significant lexical or thematic connections)

The author argues that this arrangement causes considerable coherence problems since it is difficult to see significant connections between the parallels, and in addition, one would get the impression that the main issue addressed here by Paul is gender. So instead, he proposed a different structural division (ABC//D//C'B'A), within which passages considered to be interpolations were eliminated:

¹⁰ SHACK 2014.

- A – 11:2–3a,16–34 // A' 14:26–33,36–40 (order during worship)
- B – 12:1–13 // B' 14:14–25 (diversity of the Body causes the growth of the community)
- C – 12:14–31a // C' 14:1–13 (diversity of the Body builds each part)
- D – 12:31b–13:13 (love as the key to transformation).

This arrangement of the text provides an interpretive framework according to which it can be concluded that the problem addressed here by Paul is the divisions and disorder in the Corinthian community, while the central section D is the axis of the whole and places the emphasis on love as the key to solving the problems plaguing this church. Milinovich concludes that although the anonymous interpolator correctly recognized the structural pattern of the entire passage, his effort to include gender issues of interest makes the whole less coherent and raises additional interpretive problems.¹¹

However, some weaknesses in the above argumentation can be noted. First of all, the hypothetical arrangement of the ABCD //D'C'B'A' structure proposed by Milinovich, which takes into account the presence of the passages 11:3b–16 and 14:34–35 in the text, is not the only possible proposal, and one must of course agree that it is completely wrong. Earlier, Bailey¹² proposed a layout that is almost identical to Milinovich's structural proposal (ABC//D//C'B'A'), except, of course, that the passages discussed here are integral to the text of the letter there. Milinovich does not seem to be familiar with Bailey's proposal, or at least does not refer to it, but the fact that in many places the observations of the two scholars agree proves that the objective identification of concentric structures in the text is possible and is indeed the key to understanding the message of 1 Cor.

¹¹ MILINOVICH 2013: 145–147

¹² BAILEY 1983: 170. This proposal was further developed in TORBUS 2023: 1368–1380.

According to Bailey's observations, the main part of 1 Kor is composed of 5 discourses, which are organized concentrically and include the following components:¹³

1. Appeal to authoritative traditional teaching – A
2. Description of the problem (often with emphasis on the negative aspect) – B
3. Teaching on the problem at hand – C
4. Referring again to the problem (often with proposed solutions) – B'
5. Appeal to Paul's apostolic authority – A'

These components in the macro-structure can be more or less elaborate and are constructed from micro-structures, between which there are different types of relations. It can be noted that at the level of microstructures, these are rather lexical relations, and at the level of macrostructures, rather thematic relations. From this perspective, the passage we are interested in here can be divided into the following elements:¹⁴

- A – 11:2 – a reference to traditional teaching¹⁵
- B – 11:2–34 – social status and unity of the church during services
 - a. 11:2–16 – gender breakdowns – men and women
 - b. 11:17–34 – divisions by wealth status
- C – 12:1–31 – The diversity of the Spirit's gifts and the unity of the church
- D – 13:1–13 – Love as a remedy for tensions in the church
- C' – 14:1–25 – Spiritual gifts should build up the church
- B' – 14:26–36 – spiritual gifts and order during worship services
 - b'. 14:26–33a – the orderly use of spiritual gifts during the service

¹³ BAILEY 1983: 164.

¹⁴ TORBUS 2023: 1368.

¹⁵ *I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you* (NRSV: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2011&version=NRSVUE>).

a'. 14:33b–36 – female-induced disorder during the service

A' – Conclusion with reference to the authority of Paul.¹⁶

As can be seen, Milinovich and Bailey treat Chapter 13 as a central element of the discourse. Love is supposed to be the value whose cultivation can allow the church to function harmoniously, which is supposed to be a unity, being at the same time a collection of diverse individuals. That is why the teaching on this topic is the axis of the entire discourse.

Both scholars also recognize the relationship between the content of chapters 12 and 14, with Milinovich unnecessarily dividing the material of chapter 12 into two parts, failing to recognize that it is an integral structure with the parabola of the church as a body at the center (12:12–26). It seems that due to his interpretive decision, he is forced to look for appropriate symmetries in chapter 14. This results, unfortunately, in an artificial division of the material, which is based on a vague and unclear distinction between the part of the text which, according to the scholar, deals with the building up of the community (14:1–13) and the part devoted to the growth of the community (14:14–25). A more consistent interpretation, however, seems to be that these parts of the discourse are simply about the problem of the tension between the diversity of spiritual gifts and unity in the church, and thus in chapter 12 Paul describes the nature of the problem, and in 1 Corinthians 14:1–25 he suggests a solution in the form of spiritual gifts that will build up the church, thus contributing to its unity.

Both scholars also see thematic relationships between the extremes of the discourse, namely chapter 11 and the end of chapter 14. However, there seem to be structural and logical reasons to treat the passages removed by Milinovich as original thoughts of Paul. Well, in both chapters 11 and 14:26–36,

¹⁶ See verse 37: *what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord (NRSV)*

Paul describes various examples of the confusion that arises in common Christian gatherings. In chapter 11, these problems are related to a misunderstanding of the status of the Christian, who, upon entering the church, gains a new identity, but at the same time functions in a world of social relations where gender or property status is an important element. This is manifested, on the one hand, in an attempt to blur gender differences (11:2–16),¹⁷ and, on the other hand, in an attempt to constantly translate social relationships into relationships in the church, with the result that rich people are served at the table first (11:17–34).¹⁸ Such attitudes undeniably destroy the unity of the church. In 14:26–36, in turn, we see some manifestations of chaos in the worship service, the cause of which is a misunderstanding of the nature of glossolalia and prophecy as gifts beyond the control of the consciousness of the users. Paul's recommendations are a logical continuation of the argument on spiritual gifts, and at the same time, the theme of lack of unity manifested through disorder connects this final part of the discourse to its beginning. Paul's instructions aim to elicit in the Corinthians the reflex to control themselves when using the gift of tongues and prophecy. They must learn to speak one at a time, and even become silent (verses 28 and 30) at the right moment so that everything happens in a certain order and is understood by all present (14:26–33a). Also, women disrupting the service with questions are to learn to be silent (verse 34) at the appropriate time and to ask their questions outside the gathering (14:33b–36).¹⁹ Paul thus conducts his discourse in an orderly and logical manner, deftly addressing all sorts of issues related to the tension between the church's diversity and its unity. The topic of divisions manifested in

¹⁷ Perhaps as an echo of Paul's teaching about the lack of gender differences, an example of which is found in Galatians 3:28.

¹⁸ See TORBUS 2009:217–219; TORBUS 2023: 1368–1372.

¹⁹ THISELTON 2000: 484–492 gives a persuasive and context-appropriate interpretation of the passage on women's silence.

the communal meetings begins and ends the discourse, and the topics related to women form a ringing structure that is easy for listeners to grasp. The entire discourse culminates in a conclusion that, like throughout the letter, includes a reference to Paul's authority, a signal that a change of topic may be imminent.

Therefore, it can be concluded that observing the structure of the text of 1 Corinthians 11:2–14:40 not only does not necessarily lead to the adoption of the view of interpolation but can even strengthen the thesis of the integrity of the entire passage, without having to throw out the passages dedicated to women from the text.

Another important argument that led Milinovich to accept the interpolation thesis is the belief that the passages discussed above are inconsistent with other Pauline texts while being similar to texts about women contained in deutero-Pauline writings.²⁰ Milinovich maintains that the passages in 1 Corinthians 11–14 express thoughts at odds with Paul's actual attitude toward women. Here he cites Paul's teaching on the lack of gender differences in Galatians 3:28 and lists examples of women who worked with Paul and played very important roles in the early church. On the other hand, according to Milinovich, the passages of 1 Corinthians discussed here harmonize well with the passages of the Pastoral Epistles, where women are, according to him, portrayed as inferior to men, are blamed for original sin, are encouraged to bear children and to dress modestly.²¹ All this is to prove that 1 Corinthians 11:3b–15 and 14:34–35 must have been probably added by some later anonymous editor.

However, the above argumentation is based on interpretations that do not stand up to criticism when we consider the context of the entire passage under review. Regarding

²⁰ MILINOVICH 2013: 147–151

²¹ MILINOVICH 2013: 151.

1 Corinthians 14:34–35, I have already cited above the persuasive exegesis of Thiselton, who convincingly demonstrated that this was not about forbidding women to speak in church, but about the discipline involved in asking questions during the service. It is possible that it was about some disorderly form of “judging” what one of the prophets said (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29). Forbidding women to speak in the church would also contradict 1 Corinthians 11:5, where it speaks of women prophesying in the church. This contradiction would indicate some inattention on the part of Paul or even a possible editor introducing the interpolation. Of course, the mystery remains as to which women disrupted the service in this way, but that’s a topic for a separate article.

As for 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, there are serious arguments that contradict the thesis of the misogynistic nature of the considerations contained therein. The very juxtaposition of the relationship between God and Christ with the relationship between man and woman precludes the possibility of seeing a relationship of submission between these entities. Even St. Augustine referred to this passage in his Christological reflections in *De Trinitate* 1.6.12, where he wrote that the Son is equal to the Father, and the difference between them is functional. A structural exegesis of this passage²² shows that Paul here presents the Corinthians with various juxtaposed images of the male head and the female head assigning them certain valuations. The female head, which is uncovered and has short or shaved hair, is associated with something dishonorable, in contrast to the situation when the female hair is naturally long. In contrast, a male head that is covered and has long hair is associated with shame. Thus, it is easy to see that the appearance of a male head is valued negatively when we observe features that are inherent in a female head, and conversely, a female

²² See TORBUS 2009:183–231. TORBUS 2023:1368–1371. In this text, due to volume limits, only the most important theses are included.

head with male features is viewed negatively. One gets the impression that Paul doesn't want us to interpret too literally his teaching about the lack of differences between men and women (Galatians 3:28) and is holding back somewhat radical women who seek to embody this new order in Christ. This would explain why, in the key passages of 1 Corinthians 11:10, Paul writes for women to "have control of their head" ($\xi\kappa\omega\nu\sigma\iota\alpha\nu \xi\chi\epsilon\iota\nu \dot{\epsilon}\pi\dot{\iota}\tau\dot{\iota}\varsigma \kappa\epsilon\varphi\alpha\lambda\dot{\iota}\varsigma$). Perhaps his point is to encourage women to give up a certain "right" ($\xi\kappa\omega\nu\sigma\iota\alpha$) belonging to them manifest their new and beyond social stereotype identity in Christ for the sake of the community, as he has done in other contexts (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1–6, where the dominant word is precisely $\xi\kappa\omega\nu\sigma\iota\alpha$). Thus, by showing the unity and at the same time the otherness of God and Christ, Paul illustrates the paradoxical and multidimensional nature of the relationship between men and women, who are also one (Galatians 3:28), but at the same time functionally different. It seems that Paul simply does not want to blur the differences between the sexes in a revolutionary way, as this would only create problems in the society of the time. The overriding goal for Paul is to maintain the unity of the church despite any differences.

If the above discussion goes in the right direction, then, contrary to Milinovich, in 1 Corinthians 11–14 we find a teaching on women that does not harmonize at all with what we read in the later Pastoral Epistles, but instead stands in full harmony with what we know about the importance and role of women in Paul's churches. What shines through from the pages of the letter is the great activity and radicalism of women, which the Apostle in his pastoral concern tries to put some brakes on for the sake of the whole community, which is facing all sorts of problems of division and lack of unity.

Conclusion

This text is a polemic against the thesis formulated by Milinovich that 1 Corinthians 3b–15 is an interpolation. Milinovich's

proposed structure of 1 Corinthians 11–14 is criticized, and an alternative proposal is presented showing that the entire discourse remains consistent and coherent without the need to remove Milinovich's questionable passages from it. Based on the structure identified by Bailey, an interpretation was carried out, which shows that the entire discourse is structured in a ring. At the center is chapter 13, which is the axis of the entire discourse and contains the solution to the problem of divisions in the Corinthian church. Chapters 12 and 14:1–25 are devoted to the problem of the diversity of spiritual gifts in the church, which should be a unity. On the other hand, 11:2–34 and 14:26–36 deal with the problem of various divisions and the disorder that manifests itself in worship services as a result of them. Chapter 11 focuses on the divisions that result from a misunderstanding of the issues of social and gender differences, and Chapter 14 on the disorder that results from a misunderstanding of the nature of spiritual gifts. The discourse begins (11:2) with an appeal to the authority of traditional teaching, and concludes (14:37–40) with an appeal to the apostolic authority of Paul.

In addition to an alternative proposal regarding the structure of the text, an interpretation of the passages that are questionable to Milinovich has also been offered that challenges his claim that these passages contradict Paul's theology contained in his unarguable writings. There are arguments in the literature that these texts should not be read as a message calling on women to be subordinate to men. Thus, their content is rather at odds with what we read in the later Pastoral Epistles, if we accept their anti-woman overtones.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the interpolation thesis defended by Milinovich is also untenable due to its lack of support from any evidence from the manuscript tradition. Acceptance of the interpolation thesis in such a situation should be supported by indisputable arguments, which is not the case here.

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