

## ***Does Κεφαλη (“Head”) Mean “Source” Or “Authority Over” in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples\****

**Wayne Grudem**  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

[p.38]

(One of the sensitive issues currently being discussed in many churches and seminaries is what the Bible has to say about women. So much has been written on this subject during the past decade that it is now becoming difficult to find anything new or fresh or challenging: positions are becoming hardened, justified by the same arguments someone else has already advanced, without close and humble examination of the validity of those arguments. Dr. Grudem’s article breaks that mold: his essay examines an enormous quantity of primary data to provide some controls in establishing the meaning of “head” and “headship” in the New Testament—and as a result he demonstrates convincingly that one major strand of modern interpretation, repeated from book to book, is simply wrong. Because of the primary nature of this research, we have decided to publish his essay here, even though it is simultaneously being published as an appendix to the new edition of George Knight’s *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, published by Moody Press.—Ed.)

When the New Testament says that the “head of every man is Christ” and “the head of a woman is the man” (1 Cor 11:3), or that “the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph 5:23), Christians have usually understood the word head to mean “authority over.” Thus, Christ is the authority over the church and a husband is the authority over his wife.

But that viewpoint has been challenged recently by those who claim, at least for some passages, that the word head means “source” or “origin” rather than “authority over.” Thus, Christ is the source of every man, Christ is the source of the church, and—referring to Adam and Eve—the man is the source of the woman. It is the purpose of this appendix to examine that recent claim on the basis of a survey of more than 2,300 examples of the Greek word κεφαλή (“head”) from ancient Greek literature.

### **Arguments in Favor of the Meaning “Source”**

#### **Modern Authors**

Perhaps the most influential and explicit statement of the position that

[p.39]

κεφαλή means “source” was the article, “Does Male Dominance Tarnish Our Translations?” by Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen.<sup>1</sup> The Mickelsens argued that *head* in Greek usage “does

---

\* Reprinted from the appendix of *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, by George W. Knight III. Copyright 1977, 1985 by George W., Knight III. Used by permission of Moody Press.

<sup>1</sup> Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, “Does Male Dominance Tarnish Our Translations?” *Christianity Today*, 5 October 1979, pp. 23-29. (See also their article, “The ‘Head’ of the Epistles,” *Christianity Today*, 20 February 1981, pp. 20-23.)

not mean ‘boss’ or ‘final authority,’” but that a “common meaning” was “source, or origin, as we use it in the ‘head of the Mississippi River’” (p.23). They suggested the meaning “source” for the word *head* in 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Colossians 1:18.

Other writers make similar claims. Regarding 1 Corinthians 11:3, Margaret Howe states, “The word *head* here must be understood not as ‘ruler’ but as ‘source.’ Christ came from God; he is ‘the only Son from the Father’ (John 1:14). As the agent of creation (John 1:3), Christ brought the man into being... and from the male of the species, the female came into being (Gen 2:21–22).”<sup>2</sup>

Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty say, “*kephale* is used almost synonymously with *arche*, ‘beginning,’ somewhat similar to our use of ‘the headwaters of a river’ or ‘fountain head.’ “Thus, when Ephesians 5:23 says “Christ is the head of the church, his body,” they take it to mean that He is the church’s “lifegiver.” And when Colossians 2:10 calls Christ “the head of all rule and authority,” Scanzoni and Hardesty say, “‘Head’ here obviously means ‘source.’ “Similarly, “Christ’s headship over the church refers to his being the source of its life.”<sup>3</sup>

Richard and Joyce Boldrey apparently support this interpretation when they say of 1 Corinthians 11, “When Paul spoke of woman’s head being the man, he was emphasizing man’s temporal priority and woman’s derivation from him.”<sup>4</sup>

The foregoing authors represent what we may call a “Christian feminist” perspective; others who do not generally endorse the Christian feminist position have also supported this view of κεφαλή. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:3, F. F. Bruce writes, “By *head* in this context we are probably to understand not, as has frequently been suggested, ‘chief’ or ‘ruler’ but rather ‘source’ or ‘origin’—a sense well attested for Greek κεφαλή.” Similarly, C. K. Barrett says, “In Greek usage the word, when metaphorical, may apply... to origin... That this is the sense of the word here is strongly suggested by verses 8f.” Colin Brown says of 1 Corinthians 11:3, “Here ‘head’ is probably to be understood not as ‘chief’ or ‘ruler’ but as ‘source,’ or ‘origin.’” And James Hurley, although retaining the sense “authority over” in 1 Corinthians 11:3, allows the meaning “source” in Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15. He says, “In English we speak of the ‘head’ of a river to refer to its point of origin. This was a typical usage of ‘head’ (κεφαλή) in classical Greek... In Paul’s day, therefore, the Greek word ‘head’ (κεφαλή) could mean a physical head, a person with authority, or the source of something. Head (κεφαλή) was used in first-century Greek as a synonym for the more common words for ‘ruler’ (ἄρχων) and for ‘source’ (ἀρχή).”<sup>5</sup>

[p.40]

### **Summary of evidence supporting the meaning “source”**

The repeated claim by these authors is that *source* was a commonly known or easily recognized sense of the word *head* (κεφαλή) for the Greek-speaking readers of Paul’s epistles.

---

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Howe, *Women and Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1974), pp. 30-31; 100.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Boldrey and Joyce Boldrey, *Chauvinist or Feminist? Paul’s View of Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), p. 103.; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Black, 1971), p. 248; Colin Brown, “Head,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 2:156–63; James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1981), p. 164.

Indeed, that point must be established by anyone arguing for the meaning "source" in the New Testament. For if we cannot show that "source" was a recognized meaning of κεφαλή in the ancient world, then we must conclude that no such possible meaning would have come to the minds of Paul or his readers, and we shall be forced to look at other possible senses to interpret the New Testament passages in question.

What kind of evidence is needed? The same kind needed to establish the possible meaning of any word in ancient literature: brief quotations from a few occurrences of the word in any ancient Greek writer where the context makes it clear that the author is using κεφαλή to mean "source." That is the common procedure for establishing possible meanings for words in all New Testament study; if "source" is to be considered a legitimate sense of κεφαλή, we must have such evidence.

The need for such clear examples is even more important because "source" is not listed as a possible meaning for κεφαλή in the standard lexicon for New Testament Greek by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker. Nor do the older New Testament lexicons by Thayer or Cremer list such a sense; nor does the lexicon to the papyri by Moulton and Milligan.<sup>6</sup> (See the discussion below regarding the entry in Liddell-Scott, the lexicon for classical—not specifically New Testament—Greek.)

Thus, authors who propose the sense "source" are proposing a new meaning, one previously unrecognized by New Testament lexicons. That does not make the meaning "source" impossible, but it does mean that we are right to demand some convincing citations from ancient Greek literature that the editors of these lexicons had overlooked or misunderstood.

The evidence given by the previously mentioned authors is as follows: Margaret Howe, Richard and Joyce Boldrey, and Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty cite no evidence from ancient literature or from other scholars. F.F. Bruce and James Hurley cite no evidence from ancient literature, but

[p.41]

both refer to an article by Stephen Bedale.<sup>7</sup> Hurley says that Bedale "provides careful documentation of the meaning of κεφαλή" (p. 164, n. 1). Colin Brown cites no evidence from ancient literature but refers to the commentary by F. F. Bruce and the article by Bedale. Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen cite no evidence from ancient literature, but they do refer to the meaning "source" listed in the Liddel-Scott lexicon for classical Greek. The entry in this Liddell-Scott lexicon cites Herodotus 4.91 and *Orphic Fragments* 21a as evidence for the meaning "source."<sup>8</sup> C. K. Barrett also mentions the Bedale article and cites Herodotus 4.91 (correctly noting that the plural "heads" is used there) and *Orphic Fragments* 21a, the same two texts cited by the Liddel-Scott lexicon. Thus, apart from the "careful documentation" we

---

<sup>6</sup> W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. rev. (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1979); Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956; Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, trans. W. Urwick (1886; reprinted, Naperville, Ill.: Alienson, n.d.); J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, 2 vols. (New York: Gordon, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Bedale, "The Meaning of κεφαλή in the Pauline Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 5 (1954): 211-15.

<sup>8</sup> H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., with Supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).

have been told to expect in the article by Bedale, the actual hard data adduced to support the meaning “source” turn out to consist of just two texts.

Moreover, upon reading the frequently-cited article by Bedale we are surprised to find that he does not cite even one text from ancient Greek literature outside the Bible. Thus the widely accepted argument for a “common” use of κεφαλή to mean “source” in extra-Biblical Greek literature has rested on only two occurrences of the word. Whether or not those will actually support the argument must be decided by looking at the two texts themselves. But before we do that, it is appropriate to analyze briefly the 1954 article by Bedale.

### **The argument by Bedale**

Bedale bases his argument for the meaning “source” in 1 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 4:15, and Colossians 2:19 on the following three points:

(1) κεφαλή *does not normally mean “ruler.”* Bedale says, “In normal Greek usage, classical or contemporary, κεφαλή does not signify ‘head’ in the sense of ruler, or chieftan, of a community.”<sup>9</sup> Bedale cites no evidence—no results of word studies, no lexical authorities—to demonstrate his point; he simply assumes it to be true for the rest of the article.

In the following major section of this essay I will quote thirty-two examples of κεφαλή used to mean “authority over” or “ruler” in Greek writings outside the New Testament (seventeen are from Greek translations of the Old Testament and fifteen are from other literature). On the basis of those quotations it is safe to conclude that this first point of Bedale’s argument is simply a misstatement of the facts and cannot be accepted as valid.

(2) *The ancient world did not think that the head controlled the body.* Bedale’s second point of support is the assertion that Paul and his readers would not think of the head as the ruling or controlling part of the body, for

[p.42]

that idea was contrary to popular psychology in the ancient world. In fact, Bedale says that J. Armitage Robinson is “guilty of serious anachronism” (p. 212) when Robinson writes that it is natural to think of Christ as the body’s head in Ephesians 4:15, “for,” says Robinson, “that is the seat of the brain which controls and unifies the organism.” Bedale says that such a metaphor “would be unintelligible to St. Paul or his readers... In St. Paul’s day, according to popular psychology, both Greek and Hebrew, a man reasoned and purposed, not ‘with his head,’ but ‘in his heart.’”<sup>10</sup>

Is Bedale correct in asserting that the ancient world did not think of the head as controlling or ruling the body? Once again he gives no evidence to support this affirmation. In fact, there is significant evidence to contradict it. Plato (5th-4th cent. B.C.), describing the parts of the human body, wrote of “the head which is the most divine part and which reigns (δεσποτέω) over all the parts within us” (*Timaeus* 44.D). Plutarch (A.D. 46-120), one of the most prominent Greek authors from the New Testament period (and one who reflected secular thinking independent of Jewish or Christian influence), explained why the words *soul* (ψυχή) and *head* (κεφαλή) can be used to speak of the whole person: “We affectionately call a person

---

<sup>9</sup> Bedale, p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

‘soul’ or ‘head’ from his ruling parts (ἀπὸ τῶν κυριοτατῶν)” (*Table-Talk* 692.D.11). Philo (Jewish philosopher, c. 30 B.C.—c. A.D. 45), representing one aspect of first century Judaism, had a similar understanding: “As the head in the living body is the ruling place (τὸ ἡγεμονεύον πρόπον), so Ptolemy became head among kings” (*Life of Moses* 2.30). “The mind is the head and ruler (ἡγεμονικόν) of the sense-perception in us” (*Life of Moses* 2.82); “‘Head’ we interpret allegorically to be the ruling (ἡγεμόνα) mind of the soul” (*On Dreams* 2.207).

In light of those statements from three very diverse authors, Bedale’s second major point, that a metaphor of the head ruling the body “would be unintelligible to St. Paul or his readers,” must be rejected as contrary to fact and therefore invalid.

(3) *The Septuagint shows that κεφαλή can mean “source.”* This is Bedale’s final major point. He argues as follows:

(a) The Hebrew word רִאשׁוֹן (“head”) was translated sometimes by κεφαλή and sometimes by ἀρχή (“beginning” or “ruler”) in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by both Jews and Christians in the first century). (b) When רִאשׁוֹן meant a literal head of a person or animal, or the “top” of some object, the Septuagint translated it with κεφαλή. (c) When רִאשׁוֹן meant “first” or “beginning”—as it sometimes did in the Hebrew Old Testament—it was translated by ἀρχη. (d) When רִאשׁוֹן meant “ruler” or “chief” it was translated by either κεφαλή or ἀρχη (even though more often than either of those it was translated by ἄρχων or ἀρχηγός, more common words for “ruler”). (This point, incidentally, admits the meaning of “ruler” for Septuagint Greek and thus seems to contradict Bedale’s first major argument—unless he means to exclude the Septuagint by using the phrase “normal Greek usage.”) (e) Consequently, “in St. Paul’s usage, κεφαλή may very well approximate in meaning to ἀρχή.” (f) Bedale concludes that since ἀρχή sometimes means “source,” κεφαλή in Paul’s writings may mean “source” as well, and he

[p.43]

applies this to 1 Corinthians 11:3, Ephesians 4:15, and Colossians 2:19.<sup>11</sup>

How should this third argument be evaluated? It is a classic example of a major exegetical error. Bedale has skipped from the idea that in one sense (“ruler”) κεφαλή and ἀρχή have the same meaning (point d above) to an unwarranted assertion that in *other* senses (“beginning,” “source”), or perhaps in *all* senses, they have the same meaning (points e and f above). He even speaks of a “virtual equation of κεφαλή with ἀρχή<sup>12</sup>” But he gives not one text to demonstrate that the words share the meanings “source” or “beginning.”

In fact, the reader will search Bedale’s article in vain for any examples showing that κεφαλή ever meant “source” in the Septuagint. It is understandable that ἀρχή, which sometimes meant “leader,” would be interchangeable with κεφαλή in Old Testament texts in which the concept “ruler” is present. But that fact alone does not demonstrate that κεφαλή could take on other senses of ἀρχή such as “source.”

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 213

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

A parallel to Bedale's argument in English would be if I were to argue (1) that "jump" and "spring" could both be used to translate some foreign word when it referred to a "leap in the air," and (2) that therefore there is a "virtual equation of 'jump' and 'spring' in English." I would then go on to argue that "jump" *also* can mean "a fountain of water," or "a coil of metal," or "a pleasant season of the year when flowers begin to bloom." If I produced no unambiguous examples of written texts where "jump" clearly took these senses, readers would rightly think my reasoning erroneous and invalid.

Similarly, since Bedale has produced no example of Septuagint texts in which κεφαλή means "source," his third and final argument must be rejected as faulty in reasoning, unsupported by any hard facts, and therefore invalid. We may hope that Bedale's article will no longer be quoted as proving that κεφαλή at the time of the New Testament could mean "source," for his first two points are simply contrary to fact, and his third point commits a major exegetical blunder that leads him to a false conclusion.

If Bedale's article does not prove that κεφαλή can mean "source," we are left with only two remaining pieces of evidence that have been used to prove that meaning: Herodotus 4.91 and *Orphic Fragments* 21a.

### **The Evidence From Ancient Literature**

Herodotus (5th cent. B.C.) says, "From the heads (κεφαλαί, plural) of the Tearus River flows water most pleasant and good" (4.91). But when we look again at the Liddell-Scott lexicon under κεφαλή we find that κεφαλή refers to the source of a river only in the plural; in the singular it means "mouth" of a river (they cite Callimachus, *Aetia*. 2.46, "I know Gela [a city], placed at the mouth [κεφαλή] of a river," referring to Gela on the south coast of Sicily at the mouth of the Gelas River).

[p.44]

How can the same word refer to the sources of a river in the plural, but the mouth of the river in the singular? The answer is evident from an examination of the general category of meanings listed under this sense (II) in Liddell-Scott: "of things, extremity." That is, the end point or furthest extension of an item can be called its *head*: the "top, brim of a vessel"; the "capital of a column"; the "coping of a wall"; the "head of a garlic"; the "base of the heart"; the "origin [in the sense of "point of origin" or "starting point"] of muscles"; the "extremity of a plot of land"; the "beginning of a period of time." (They give examples for all of these.) We see this sense of "end point" in Psalm 118:22 (LXX Ps 117:22), "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head (κεφαλή) of the corner," namely, the starting point or furthest end stone of the corner. (That verse is quoted in Matt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Lk 20:17; Acts 4:11; and 1 Pet 2:7, all using κεφαλή.) In fact, κεφαλή takes the sense "top" or "end point" 22 times in the Septuagint alone. (Gen 8:5; 11:14; 28:12; 2 Chr 3:16; Job 1:17, *et al*). For example, the ends of the poles used to carry the Ark of the Covenant are called the "heads" of the poles in the Septuagint translation of 1 Kings 8:8 (LXX 3 Kings 8:8). This is a natural and understandable extension of the word *head*, since our heads are at the "top" or "end" of our bodies.

Now the river quotations become clear. Someone speaking of the "heads" of a river is speaking of the many "ends" of a river where tributaries begin to flow toward the main stream. On the other hand, someone speaking of the "head" of a river is speaking of the one point at which the river enters into the sea, what we call in English the "mouth" of the river.

Therefore these examples from Herodotus and elsewhere do not prove a new meaning (“source”) for κεφαλή but only provide specific examples of a well-established and long-recognized sense, “top, furthest extension, end point, beginning point.” Indeed, that is exactly what the editors of Liddell-Scott intended, for they placed the river examples as a subcategory under general category II, “of things, extremity.”

Those who cite Herodotus or the “head of a river” examples to show that κεφαλή could have meant “source” at the time of the New Testament have not been careful enough in their use of Herodotus or Liddell-Scott. First, it is improper to take a meaning from a category that is specifically stated to apply to “things” and then apply it to persons. Second, when Liddell-Scott specifies that the plural refers to a river’s “source” whereas the singular applies to the river’s “mouth,” it is improper to use the meaning that applies only to the *plural* (“source”) for the instances in the New Testament, all of which are *singular*. If one insists on applying the river quotations to the husband-wife statements in the New Testament, for example, he will have to use the singular sense and obtain the meaning, “the husband is the mouth of the wife.” The absurdity of that sentence is evident at once, but in terms of use of the Liddell-Scott lexicon it is based on exactly the same procedure as those who claim “source of a river” to prove that κεφαλή means “source” in the New Testament. (Indeed, the procedure is in a formal way one degree more valid, because it at least uses a singular sense to define a singular New Testament noun.)

We conclude that Herodotus 4.19 shows that the plural of κεφαλή can refer to the “end points” or “extremities” of a thing, and that this text therefore cannot be used to show that κεφαλή validly meant “source” gen-

[p.45]

erally at the time of the New Testament.

That leaves only one text, *Orphic Fragments* 21a, to prove that “source” was a “common meaning” at the time of the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> The *Orphic Fragments* are a collection of fragments of poems preserved from a very early date in Greek literature. Of these fragments the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* states, “The dates and personalities of the alleged authors are unknown to us.”<sup>14</sup> Because Plato (c. 429–347 B.C.) quotes from them, they cannot be dated later than the fifth century B.C. That does not make them completely invalid as evidence for the possible meaning of a word at the time of the New Testament; but it must be said that only one example of a word used in a fragmentary poem by an unknown author of unknown date 500 or more years before the time of the New Testament is probably the weakest possible evidence that one could imagine. I know of no other case in which a common New Testament word has been endowed with a new meaning on the basis of such evidence, and readers might well be forgiven for suspecting that an argument constructed on such a slim basis would be guilty of special pleading. But let us examine the text nonetheless.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Mickelsen and Mickelsen, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p. 759.

<sup>15</sup> The critical edition of the text is found in Otto Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), p. 91. It reads: Ζεὺς πρῶτος γένετο, Ζεὺς ὕστατος ἀργικέραυνος Ζεὺς κεφαλή, Ζεὺς μέσσα Δοις δ’ ἐκ πάντα τελεῖται. The text is quoted in Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* 7 (401a.29–30), found in vol. 3, p. 406 of the Loeb Classical Library edition of Aristotle, and may be conveniently consulted there by the reader without access to Kern’s critical text. The Loeb text has ἀρχικηραυνός, “ruler of lightning,” as a variant reading in the first line and τέτυκται instead of τελεῖται in the second line

The translation of the text is:

Zeus was first, Zeus is last with white, vivid lightning:  
Zeus the head, Zeus the middle, Zeus from whom all things are perfected.

Both the critical text by Kern and the Liddell-Scott lexicon note that the word κεφαλή is not established with certainty as the correct reading here, because another copy of the text has ἀρχή “beginning,” instead of κεφαλή, “head.” Thus, this bit of evidence is somewhat weaker still: it is just one of two possible variant readings.

Nevertheless, what does κεφαλή mean in this text? Even if “source” were a well-attested meaning of κεφαλή in many other texts, it is doubtful that “source” would be the best meaning here. The sense “beginning” (of a series) or “first one” (in terms of time) seems most likely here because of (1) the similarity to the idea of “first” and “last” in the previous line and (2) the contrast with “middle” and the mention of perfection in the same line—giving the sense, “Zeus is the beginning, Zeus is the middle, Zeus is the one who completes all things.” The variant reading ἀρχή, which can mean “beginning” as well as “source” (or “ruler”) would also fit that sense well. Now that is not to say that the writer of this poetry was denying that all things come from Zeus or that Zeus is the origin of all things. Indeed,

[p.46]

subsequent lines affirm things close to that idea. I am simply arguing that the context shows that the author is not talking about whether Zeus or someone or something else is the source or origin of all things; he is rather affirming that in terms of time Zeus was first and Zeus will be last as well. (For example, my oldest son is the “beginning” or “first” of my sons, but he is not the “source” of my other sons.) The line is best translated, “Zeus the beginning, Zeus the middle, Zeus from whom all things are perfected.”

Thus, even if κεφαλή could be shown from other texts sometimes to take the meaning “source,” it would seem an inappropriate sense in this text. And because no other examples of κεφαλή meaning “source” are given by Liddell-Scott or cited by other authors, it seems that the meaning “source” should be ruled out as even a possibility in this text as well.

Regarding the entry in the Liddell-Scott lexicon, which quotes *Orphic Fragments* 21a as the only evidence for the general meaning “source, origin,” it would be more accurate if the entry were classified under the category “starting-point.” Indeed, that would allow the entry to fit more easily under the general category in which the editors have placed it, “of things, extremity,” for in this case the thing referred to is a period of time.

Thus, even this obscure support for the meaning “source” fails to be legitimate, and we are left with no evidence to convince us that “source” was a common or even a possible meaning for κεφαλή in Greek literature. Those who claim that κεφαλή could mean “source” at the time of the New Testament should be aware that the claim has so far been supported by not one clear instance in all of Greek literature, and it is therefore a claim made without any real factual support. The editors of the standard lexicons for New Testament Greek (such as Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker) have been correct not to include “source” among their lists of possible meanings for

### **Can Κεφαλή Mean “Authority Over”?**

Even if κεφαλή did not mean “source” at the time of the New Testament, are we correct in understanding it to mean “authority over”? When we read that “Christ is the head of the church” or that “the husband is the head of the wife” (Eph 5:23), are we right to think that it means Christ is the “authority over” the church and the husband is the “authority over” his wife?

### ***The Mickelsens’ Argument***

Some authors have denied that “authority over” was a legitimate sense of κεφαλή at the time of the New Testament. Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen, for example, claim “that ‘head’ in Greek usage (according to the standard Greek-English Lexicon by Liddell, Scott, Jones, McKenzie) does *not* mean ‘boss’ or ‘final authority.’” They say, “For Greek-speaking people in New Testament times who had little opportunity to read the Greek translation of the Old Testament, there were many possible meanings for ‘head’ but

[p.47]

‘supreme over’ or ‘being responsible to’ were not among them.”<sup>16</sup>

The evidence the Mickelsens give to support the claim that κεφαλή did not mean “authority over” is that the meaning is not listed in the Liddell-Scott lexicon. But one wonders why the Mickelsens cited only that lexicon and no others. In fact, Liddell-Scott is the standard lexicon for all of Greek literature from about 700 B.C. to about A.D. 600 with emphasis on classical Greek authors in the seven centuries prior to the New Testament. Liddell-Scott is the tool one would use when studying Plato or Aristotle, for example; but it is not the standard lexicon that scholars use for the study of the New Testament. (The standard lexicon for that is Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, which the Mickelsens fail to mention in their article.) Although the Liddell-Scott lexicon usually does list examples of meanings from both the New Testament and the Septuagint, its treatment of those areas is necessarily very limited; it is not nearly as detailed in those areas as the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker lexicon. So the absence of a certain sense of κεφαλή from Liddell-Scott is certainly not conclusive evidence for deciding whether κεφαλή can in fact take that sense.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Mickelsen and Mickelsen, pp. 23,25.

<sup>17</sup> In their subsequent article, “The ‘Head’ of the Epistles” (*Christianity Today*, 20 February 1981, pp. 20-23), the Mickelsens argue that κεφαλή only infrequently meant “ruler, authority” in the Septuagint (seventeen times), and that ἄρχων, “ruler,” was much more commonly used to mean “ruler, authority,” when translating the Hebrew word for “head” (ro’sh). But that argument simply proves that κεφαλή is less common than ἄρχων in this sense, not that it could not take this sense. (In fact, the seventeen LXX instances prove that it could.) In this article they also discuss the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker lexicon, but they argue that it wrongfully allows the meaning “ruler, authority” (more precisely, “in the case of living beings, to denote superior rank,” p. 430) in the New Testament. They suggest (pp. 21-22 ) not only the meaning “source” but also several other possible meanings in the relevant New Testament passages: “exalted originator and completer” (for Col 1:18), “nourisher” (for Eph 4:15 and Col 2:10), “base” or “derivation” (for 1 Cor 11:3), and “enabler” (for Eph 5:23 and Col 2:10). What they fail to mention is that not one of these new meanings they suggest is found in any Greek lexicon—Liddell-Scott, Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, or any other. Thus they have gone beyond the previous mistake of a wrong use of the meaning “source” from Liddell-Scott (see above, p.62) and created several additional meanings somewhat loosely related to the English word *source*, meanings that have no lexical support whatever. Yet they call these new meanings “common Greek meanings” (p. 21) and “recognized Greek meanings that would have been familiar to his [Paul’s] readers” (p. 23). Such statements must be rejected for lack of any clear factual support—they are simply false.

### **The Evidence From New Testament Greek Lexicons**

In fact, all the standard lexicons and dictionaries for New Testament Greek do list the meaning “authority over” for κεφαλή, “head.” Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker give under the word κεφαλή the following definition: “In the case of living beings, to denote superior rank.” They list thirteen examples of such usage.

The article on κεφαλή in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, in examining the use of κεφαλή in the Septuagint, says, “κεφαλή is used for the head or ruler of a society.” The author (Heinrich Schlier)

[p.48]

cites several examples.<sup>18</sup>

In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, volume 2, in the article “Head,” K. Munzer says that the relationship of head to body in Colossians 2:10 “expresses the authority of Christ... and the corresponding subordination of the church” (p. 162).

The older New Testament lexicons by Thayer and Cremer give similar statements. Thayer’s lexicon says under κεφαλή, “Metaphorically anything *supreme, chief, prominent*; of persons, *master, lord*”; it lists several examples.

Cremer, under κεφαλή says, “The head is that part of the body which holds together and governs all the outgoings of life... and because of its vital connection stands in the relation of ruler to the other members.” Cremer cites Colossians 1:18; 2:19; 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22; 4:15–16; and 5:23 in this connection.

Because all those widely recognized reference tools for New Testament Greek affirm the sense “authority over” for κεφαλή, one finds it hard to accept the claim of the Mickelsens that κεφαλή could not mean “authority over” in ordinary Greek at the time of the New Testament.

### **A Survey of 2,336 Examples**

But what is the actual evidence from ancient Greek literature? Are there texts that clearly use κεφαλή in the meaning “authority over”? If so, is it a frequent meaning and one that would have been understandable to readers of the New Testament epistles?

Instead of examining only the examples listed in lexicons, I decided to conduct a more extensive survey of the use of κεφαλή in ancient Greek literature. Such a survey has recently become feasible on a scale never before possible because of the existence of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) project at the University of California-Irvine. This project, which is still in process, currently has more than 20 million words from ancient Greek texts on a computerized database. When I inquired about κεφαλή, the TLG people informed me that a quick check showed about 12,000 instances of κεφαλή in their database. That was so large a

---

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76) 3:673–82. Schlier does not deny the sense “authority over” for the New Testament, but his analysis of the New Testament material is heavily biased by his assumption that we have in the New Testament “both the ideas and terminology of the Gnostic myth” (p. 681). In the New Testament, he says, “We are in the sphere of the Gnostic redeemer myth” (p. 680). Thus, he interprets many of the New Testament references in terms of later Gnostic mythology, a procedure that would be followed by few scholars and probably no evangelicals today.

list that it would have been practically impossible to check them all. I decided instead to check all the instances of κεφαλή in the authors included in TLG's "Basic Text Package, tape A." This includes almost all the authors of major importance for classical Greek, and several others as well. This set of authors gave me about 2,000 usable instances of κεφαλή dating from the eighth century B.C. (Homer) onward, and ranging over all sorts of literature, including history, philosophy,

[p.49]

drama, poetry, rhetoric, geography, and romantic writings. It provided an excellent and, it seems to me, unbiased selection of the instances of κεφαλή. I looked up every instance available to me and included them all in the following summary.<sup>19</sup>

To the TLG package I added all the instances of κεφαλή in the following authors: Philo, Josephus, the Apostolic Fathers, the Epistle of Aristeas, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian. That gave me 323 additional instances of κεφαλή that were much closer to the time and language of the New Testament than the majority of the other authors in the TLG package.

The result was a survey of 2,336 instances of κεφαλή in 36 authors from the eighth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. In each case listed below, all the extant writings of an author were searched and every instance of κεφαλή was examined and tabulated with the exception of fragmentary texts and a few other minor works that were unavailable to me. The edition used was the Loeb Classical Library edition where available; otherwise, standard texts and translations were used.<sup>20</sup>

[p.50]

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Number of Instances Checked</b>
<i>8th century B.C.</i>	
Homer (poet)	141
<i>7th century B.C.</i>	
Hesiod (poet)	18
<i>5th century B.C.</i>	

---

<sup>19</sup> I am extremely grateful to my teaching assistant, Thomas Locheed, for checking all the instances in Aristotle for me, and to a former teaching assistant, Morris Johnson, for doing an initial survey of all the instances in Philo, Josephus, the Septuagint, and some minor Christian and Jewish writings. I am also grateful for the kind assistance of the TLG staff, and especially Research Assistant Ms. Virginia Anastasopoulos, in providing me with the necessary data for this survey.

<sup>20</sup> To be more precise, the works of the authors listed were consulted in their entirety with the exception of the following: fragments of works from Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Callimachus; 49 examples in *History of Animals* and some minor works and fragments by Aristotle; 7 instances in Xenophon; 6 instances in minor works of Plutarch, and many instances in the fourth-century A.D. author Libanius (only selections from his works were available in the Loeb edition, which I used). In addition, the totals represented do not count two erroneous translations in Aquila's text of Deuteronomy 29:18 and 32:33, which are of uncertain meaning. Moreover, the following authors in the basic text package, tape A, were not in the Loeb Classical Library and I did not pursue them: Chariton (10 instances), Heliodorus (44 instances), Herodas (0 instances), Nicander Colophonius (5 instances), Pseudo-Plutarch (12 instances), Xenophon of Ephesus (1 instance).

With those exceptions, all instances are included and tabulated. After examining over 2,300 examples, it did not seem to me that the additional work involved in chasing down those more obscure references would have any significant effect on the results of the study, so I decided not to make further efforts to obtain them.

---

Aeschylus (tragic dramatist)	1
Aristophanes (comic dramatist)	56
Euripides (dramatist)	13
Herodotus (historian)	114
Plato (5th/4th century philosopher)	97
Sophocles (dramatist)	1
Thucydides (historian)	4
<i>4th century B.C.</i>	
Aristotle (philosopher)	296
Demosthenes (orator)	16
Greek anthology (various authors: 4th c. B.C. and later)	72
Xenophon (historian)	47
<i>3d century B.C.</i>	
Apollonius Rhodius (poet)	13
Aratus Soleus (poet)	35
Callimachus (poet)	5
Septuagint (various translators; 3d to 1st c. B.C.)	519
Theocritus (poet)	1
<i>2d century B.C.</i>	
Epistle of Aristeas	2
Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs	10
<i>1st century B.C.</i>	
Parthenius Nichaenus (poet)	1
<i>1st century A.D.</i>	
Apostolic Fathers	16
Josephus (Jewish historian, A.D. 37-100)	125
New Testament	74
Philo (Jewish philosopher; flourished around A.D. 40)	120
Plutarch (secular historian and philosopher, A.D. 46-120)	277
<i>2nd century A.D.</i>	
Achilles Tatius (romantic writer)	37
Pausanias (geographer)	98
Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian (translators of the Old Testament)	50
<i>3d century A.D.</i>	
Diogenes Laertius (biographer)	17
Longus (romantic writer) <sup>7</sup>	
<i>4th century A.D.</i>	
Libanius (orator)	39
	<hr/>
	2,336

The results of this survey and tabulation of uses of κεφαλή are as follows:

Meanings	Number of instances	Percentage of total instances	Percentage of 302 metaphorical uses only (all uses except l.a.)
1. <i>Of persons or other living beings</i>			

a. Physical head of man or animal	2,034	87.0%	—
b. Head referred to in adverbial phrase such as “head-long,” “overhead,” “head downwards,” etc.	28	1.2%	9.3%
c. “Head” used to refer to the whole person	119	5.1%	39.4%
d. “Head” used to mean “life” (as in capital punishment)	14	0.6%	4.6%
e. Person of superior authority or rank, or “ruler,” “ruling part”	49	2.1%	16.2%
2. <i>Of things</i>			
a. Extremity, end, top; “starting point” in series or row	69	3.0%	22.9%
b. Prominent part	6	0.3%	2.0%
c. In arguments: summary conclusion, or main point	17	0.7%	5.6%
3. “Source, origin”:			
person or thing from which something else is derived or obtained	0*	0%	0%
Totals	2,336	100%	100%

\* As explained above, I classified Herodotus 4.91 and *Orphic Fragments* 21 a under meaning 2 a (see pp. 43- 46).

As might be expected, the great majority of instances of κεφαλή refer to an actual physical head of a man or animal. The other uses are all metaphorical in some sense or other.

For our purposes, it is significant to note that the sense “ruler” or “person of superior authority or rank” occurs 49 times, which is 16.2 percent of the instances in which κεφαλή is used in a metaphorical sense. Of those, 12 are from the New Testament, 13 from the Septuagint, 5 from other Greek translations of the Old Testament, 2 from Herodotus, 1 from Plato, 1 from the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, 7 from Plutarch, 5 from Philo, 1 from the Apostolic Fathers, 1 from the Greek Anthology, and 1 from

[p.52]

Libanius. That makes it very difficult to accept anyone’s claim that *head* in Greek could not mean “ruler” or “authority over.”

The other interesting conclusion from this study is that no instances were discovered in which κεφαλή had the meaning “source, origin.” This data stands in contradiction to the last sentence of the following key section in the Mickelsens’ article:

In classical Greek “head” usually meant a person’s physical head; as a figure of speech it sometimes stood for the whole person or for life itself (e.g., “I stake my head on that”); or it could also mean the brim or upper part of something, as the “head” of an architectural column. A more common meaning was source, or origin, as we use it in the “head of the Mississippi river.”<sup>21</sup>

In this last sentence “more common” apparently means more common than the other instances in which κεφαλή was used as a “figure of speech.” But the Mickelsens give us no data to support their statement that the meaning “source or origin” was a more common metaphorical meaning than the others they mention. The reader may wonder what the basis was upon which the Mickelsens asserted that “source or origin” was a “more common meaning.” They are claiming that this sense was “more common” than the meanings “person,” “life,” or “upper part.” In our summary the meanings “person” (119 times), “life” (14 times), and “upper part, top, end” (69 times) occurred a total of 202 times out of 2,336, or 67 percent of the 202 times in which κεφαλή was used metaphorically. For the Mickelsens’ statement to be true, they would need to find more than 202 instances of the meaning “source” in a sample of 2,336 occurrences. It is fair to conclude that 0 out of 2,336 instances is not “more common”—in fact, it is not common at all—and that this crucial statement in their very influential article is simply false.

Someone might suggest at this point that our study of κεφαλή has not been exhaustive. Although we checked 2,336 instances, that leaves almost 10,000 more instances in the data banks of the TLG project in California. Perhaps those examples will show that κεφαλή can mean “source”?

To that suggestion I can only respond with an invitation to anyone who wishes to search for such evidence to go ahead and do so. Because the instances I checked represented a wide range of dates and types of literature, both religious (Jewish or Christian) and secular, it seems highly unlikely that additional significant senses will be found. Furthermore, it should be noted that my findings cover all the meanings mentioned in the major lexicons (although I have simplified the categories for the sake of presentation here).

Furthermore, any reader who wishes to search further in other literature must remember that in order for the evidence to be convincing for the time of the New Testament, it really ought to come from literature that is most representative of the Greek language at the time of the New Testament, namely, literature from the second or third century B.C. to the first century A.D. (I have conducted a much broader search simply to see if the meaning “source” might occur anywhere at all in Greek literature.) Moreover, the

[p.53]

---

<sup>21</sup> Mickelsen and Mickelsen, “Male Dominance,” p. 23.

examples (if any are found) ought to be not simply cases that are so ambiguous that one can say they “might possibly” be understood to use κεφαλή as “source,” but, in order to establish a clear case for that sense of the word, they ought to be cases in which the meaning is unambiguous and not easily explained in terms of other known senses of κεφαλή. (That is consistent with sound lexical research.) It seems safe to say that the likelihood of finding a sufficient number of unambiguous examples from texts near the time of the New Testament when none have been found by any scholars to date is, for all practical purposes, extremely low. If we are interested in biblical interpretation that is based on the facts of historical and linguistic research, then it would seem wise to give up once for all the claim that κεφαλή can mean “source.”<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> There are some other misstatements of fact in the article by the Mickelsens that should perhaps be noted at this point. Four times (twice on page 23 and twice on page 24) they give what they claim to be a “literal” translation of 1 Corinthians 11:3, where they tell the reader that they are giving “the actual words that Paul wrote” rather than a translator’s interpretation. But in all four instances they insert the word *every* in the following phrase: “and the head of *every* woman is the man.” The effect of inserting the word *every* is to make more plausible their suggestion that the verse is referring to Adam (who was the “source” of Eve and, one might say, therefore of every woman). Furthermore, it makes the meaning “authority over,” which they oppose, very difficult, for who wants to say that the authority over *every* woman is a man? But the word *every* should not be in this phrase: the Greek word for *every* (which here would be πάσης) is not in the Greek text, nor does the word *every* occur in any of the seven modern translations cited in their article.

Another misstatement of fact occurs on page 26, where they attempt to show that the King James Version exhibits male chauvinism in Romans 16:1. There the KJV translates the word διάκονος as “servant” to say that Phoebe is a “servant in the church at Cencrea.” The Mickelsens take exception to this translation, arguing that the word should be translated “deacon.” They say “Only in reference to Phoebe does the King James translate Paul’s word as ‘servant.’ In 1 Timothy 3:8, 12, it is translated ‘deacon’ but in all other places the King James uses the term ‘minister.’ Only of Phoebe is Paul’s word διάκονος translated ‘servant.’”

That gives the impression that the King James translators never used “servant” to translate διάκονος except when their male bias intruded in dealing with Phoebe. But in fact, διάκονος is translated by “servant” six other times in the KJV: Matthew 22:13 (“then said the king to the *servants*”); Matthew 23:11 (“the greatest among you shall be your *servant*”); Mark 9:35; John 2:5 (“his mother saith unto the *servants*”); John 2:9; and John 12:26 (“there shall also my *servant* be”).

At the end of the article there is a short “Editor’s Footnote,” apparently not written by the Mickelsens but added by one of the editors of *Christianity Today*. The footnote claims that “The King James Version has twisted many a passage to save the male ego—or its chauvinistic theology” (page 29). Then three of the examples it cites contain errors themselves.

First, this editor claims, “The King James Version... reverses the Greek order to place Aquila before Priscilla in deference to the husband—in spite of the fact that in the biblical text, Priscilla is clearly the leader (Acts 18:26).” Apparently the editor did not realize that the translators of the KJV used not our modern Greek New Testament but the Textus Receptus, which in fact has Aquila before Priscilla in this verse. They were not exhibiting male chauvinism but simply translating the Greek text as they had it.

Second, the editor says that in Psalm 68:11, the KJV misleadingly translates the verse to read “Great was the company of those that published the word of the Lord,” whereas, the editor tells us, “The Hebrew is explicitly feminine: ‘Great was the company of those women who published the word of the Lord.’” But this objection betrays a lack of knowledge of Hebrew grammar: terms that are grammatically “feminine” in Hebrew do not necessarily refer to feminine persons. That is especially true of collective nouns and titles and designations of office (many examples are listed in the Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley *Hebrew Grammar*, sections 122 r,s). One familiar example is “the preacher” in Ecclesiastes 1:1 the Hebrew term qohelet is grammatically “feminine” but it is used of “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccles 1:1).

Third, the editor in the final point applauds the KJV because it “correctly notes the feminine Junia in Rom 16:7 in contrast with most contemporary translations that with little or no justification transform... the woman Junia into the man Junias to avoid the unthinkable—a woman among the apostles!” (page 29). But this assertion once again betrays a very superficial knowledge of Greek and wrongly attributes chauvinistic motives to those who come down on the side of a difficult exegetical question with which the editor disagrees. As a matter of fact, the name in Romans 16:7 could be either masculine or feminine (the accusative singular form would be exactly the

[p.54]

### **Citations of Texts in Which Κεφαλή Means “Authority Over”**

It remains now only to list those instances in which κεφαλή refers to a ruler or a person of superior authority or rank. These will be listed in largely chronological order.

(1–2) In a statement in which the Delphic oracle warns the Argives to protect their full citizens from attack and thus the remainder of the population will be protected, it says, “Guarding your *head* from the blow; and the *head* shall shelter the body” (Herodotus 7.148.17).

(3) Although Plato does not use the word κεφαλή explicitly to refer to a *human* ruler or leader, he does say (in the text quoted earlier), that “the *head*... is the most divine part and the one that reigns over all the parts within us” (*Timaeus* 44.D). This sentence does speak of the head as the ruling part of the body and therefore indicates that a metaphor that spoke of the leader or ruler of a group of people as its “head” would not have been unintelligible to Plato or his hearers.

The next instances come from the Septuagint.

(4) Judges 10:18: “And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, ‘Who is the man that will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be *head* over all the inhabitants of Gilead.’”<sup>23</sup>

(5) Judges 11:8: “And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, ‘That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and be our *head* over all the inhabitants of Gilead.’”<sup>24</sup>

(6) Judges 11:9: “Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, ‘If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your *head*.’”

(7) Judges 11:11: “So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and all the people made him *head* and leader over them.”

(8) 2 Kings 22:44 [2 Samuel 22:44]: David says to God, “You shall keep me as

[p.55]

---

same in this case). A.T. Robertson in his *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in The Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1947, pp. 172-73) gives a long list of examples of personal names that had an abbreviated or shortened form at the time of the New Testament, thus indicating a very real possibility that Junias is a shortened form of the very common man’s name Junianus, similar to the example of Silas/Silvanus.

What is most unfortunate about these misleading or erroneous factual statements is that they are made in a periodical that is widely read by Christians who have no technical ability to evaluate such arguments. Because they come from a reputable magazine and presumably from knowledgeable New Testament or Old Testament scholars, ordinary readers have little choice but to accept them as true and therefore to mistrust their own English translations of the Bible wherever male-female relationships are discussed. Thus, the authority of God’s Word in speaking to this area of life begins to be undercut—and needlessly so, for these claims that “male chauvinism” has distorted our translations are, in the instances cited, based on factual statements that are simply false.

<sup>23</sup> This is the reading of the Alexandrinus text. Vaticanus has ἄρχοντα, “ruler.”

<sup>24</sup> In this verse and the next, the textual variant is the same as that mentioned in footnote 23.

the *head* of the Gentiles: a people which I knew not served me.”

(9) 3 Kings 8:1 [1 Kings 8:1] (Alexandrinus): “Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the *heads* of the tribes.”

(10) Psalm 17:43 [Psalm 18:43]: David says to God, “You will make me *head* of the Gentiles: a people whom I knew not served me.”

(11–12) Isaiah 7:8: “For the *head* of Syria is Damascus, and the *head* of Damascus is Rezin” (in both cases “head” means “ruler”: Damascus is the city that rules over Syria, and Rezin is the king who rules over Damascus).

(13–14) Isaiah 7:9: “And the *head* of Ephriam is Samaria, and the *head* of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.”

(15–16) Isaiah 9:14–16: (In the context of judgment) “So the Lord cut off from Israel *head* and tail ... the elder and honored man is the *head*, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail; for those who lead this people lead them astray.” Here the leaders of the people are called “head.”

(17) Testament of Reuben 2:2: The seven spirits of deceit are the “*heads*” or “leaders” (κεφαλαί, plural) of the works of innovation.

(18) Philo *On Dreams* 2.207: “‘Head’ we interpret allegorically to mean the ruling part of the soul.”

(19) Philo *Moses* 2.30: “As the *head* is the ruling place in the living body, so Ptolemy became among kings.”

(20) Philo *Moses* 2:82: “The mind is *head* and ruler of the sense-faculty in US.”

(21–22) Philo *On Rewards and Punishments* 1.25: “The virtuous one, whether single man or people, will be the *head* of the human race and all the others will be like the parts of the body which are animated by the powers in the *head* and at the top.”<sup>25</sup>

(The New Testament instances of κεφαλή will be treated at the end of this survey.)

(23) Plutarch *Pelopidas* 2.1.3: In an army, “the light-armed troops are like the hands, the cavalry like the feet, the line of men-at-arms itself like chest and breastplate, and the general is like the *head*.”

(24–25) Plutarch *Cicero* 14.4: Catiline says to Cicero, criticizing the Senate as weak and the people as strong, “There are two bodies, one lean and wasted, but with a *head*, and the other headless but strong and large. What am I doing wrong if I myself become a *head* for this?” In

---

<sup>25</sup> There is a sense here of the members of the “body” being encouraged and directed by the virtuous leaders who are the “head,” but there is no sense in which the ordinary people derive their being or existence from the leaders who are the “head”; thus, “source” would be an inappropriate sense of κεφαλή here as well.

saying this, Catiline was threatening to become the head of the people and thus to lead the people in revolt against Cicero. Therefore, "Cicero was all the more alarmed."<sup>26</sup>

(26) Plutarch *Galba* 4.3: "Vindex... wrote to Galba inviting him to assume the imperial power, and thus to serve what was a vigorous body in need of a *head*."

(27) We may also mention here Plutarch *Agesilaus* 2.5, where a ruler who follows popular opinions is compared to a serpent whose tail insisted on

[p.56]

leading the body instead of it being led by the *head*. The serpent consequently harmed itself. The implication is that a ruler should be like the "head" of a serpent and thereby lead the people.

(28-29) Plutarch *Table Talk* 7.7 (692.E.1): "We affectionately call a person 'soul' or '*head*' from his ruling parts." Here the metaphor of the head ruling the body is clear, as is the fact that the head controls the body in *Table Talk* 3.1 (647.C): "For pure wine, when it attacks the *head* and severs the body from the control of the mind, distresses a man."

(30) Hermas *Similitudes* 7.3: The man is told that his family "cannot be punished in any other way than if you, the *head* of the house, be afflicted."

(31) Aquila, Deuteronomy 5:23: "The *heads* of the tribes."

(32) Aquila, Deuteronomy 29:10 [Deut 29:9]: "The *heads* of tribes."

(33) Aquila, 3 Kings 8:1 [1 Kings 8:1]: "Solomon assembled all the elders of Israel and all the *heads* of the tribes."

(34) Aquila, Ezekiel 38:2: Gog is called the "ruling *head* of Meshech."

(35) Theodotian, Judges 10:18: "He will be *head* over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

(36) Libanius *Oration* 20.3.15: People who derided government authorities are said to have "heaped on their own *heads* insults."

(37) *Greek Anthology* 8.19 (Epigram of Gregory of Nazianus, fourth century A.D.): Gregory is called the "*head* of a wife and three children."

With these examples as background, we can examine several New Testament texts in which *head* seems to take the well-established sense of "ruler" or "authority over."

(38–42) 1 Corinthians 11:3: "I want you to know that the *head* of every man is Christ, and the *head* of the woman is the man, and the *head* of Christ is God." (Paul then uses this sense of head once again in verse 4 and another time in verse 5 to refer to a man who "dishonors his *head*" and a woman who "dishonors her *head*.") If κεφαλή means "authority over," then we

---

<sup>26</sup> These instances from Plutarch show that the sense "authority over" for κεφαλή was not merely a result of carrying over the force of the Hebrew term ro'sh into the Septuagint, for Plutarch was not influenced by the Hebrew Old Testament or the LXX in his use of words, nor were most of his readers.

have a sense that is both appropriate to the context (for head coverings in the first century were a sign of relation to authority, and it is therefore the question of appropriate authority relationships that leads to the question of head covering in this passage), and is consistent with the rest of Scripture. In the personal relationships between the eternal members of the Trinity, though they are equal in deity and in all their attributes, they are different in respect to authority: the Father directs and commands and sends, whereas the Son responds and obeys and comes into the world. In theological terms, there is ontological equality with economic subordination among the members of the Trinity. And that authority relationship whereby God the Father is the "authority over" God the Son is reflected in Christ's authority over every man and in the man's authority over the woman.

In an excellent discussion,<sup>27</sup> James Hurley, argues convincingly that the sense "source" is impossible in this passage: "There is no way to construct a satisfactory set of parallels if we take 'head' to mean 'source' in 1 Corinthians 11:3." He shows that however we try to construct the parallels in the sense "source" there is an impossible result: Eve was physically taken out of Adam but we cannot say that every man was physically taken out of Christ. On the other hand, Christ was the agent in the creation of every man, but we cannot

[p.57]

say that God the Father created God the Son. But if we say that God the Father was the creator of the human nature of Christ, then must we say that Adam was the creator of the human nature of Eve? Or if we say that God the Father gives the economic distinction of sonship to the Son, then must we say that Adam gives a distinct personality to Eve, or a man to a woman generally? In short, there is no sense of "source" in which the passage can be interpreted consistently within itself and with the rest of Scripture. We conclude that "authority over" is the correct sense for *head* in 1 Corinthians 11:3.

(43) Ephesians 1:22: "He has put all things under his feet and has made him the *head* over all things for the church." Here God the Father made Christ the authority over all things for the sake of and the benefit of the church.

(44) Ephesians 4:15: "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the *head*, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." In this passage, the context again shows Christ's lordship over the church (compare verses 8, 10–12, which speak of Christ's ascension into heaven and his bestowing gifts on the church). Thus, we are to continually grow up into conformity with the one who is the sovereign Lord ruling over the church, and it is the rule and direction and guidance "from him" by which the whole body works properly, grows, and "upbuilds itself in love." Here again the guiding and ruling function of Christ as head over the church is shown to direct all its activities and make it work properly.

(45 46) Ephesians 5:22–24: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the *head* of the wife as Christ is the *head* of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands." In this context, the idea of subjection to an authority that is implied by the word ὑποτάσσω is very appropriately emphasized by the image of Christ as the "authority over"

---

<sup>27</sup> Hurley, pp. 166-67.

the church and the husband as the "authority over" the wife. And as Paul does in every context where he mentions authority within marriage, he immediately goes on to emphasize that that authority, that headship, must be exercised in love, in gentleness, and with consideration for one's wife above one's self (vv. 25–30).

(47) Colossians 1:18: "He is the *head* of the body, the church." Here Paul, in emphasizing the great superiority of Christ, reminds his readers that Christ is the exalted authority over the church.

(48) Colossians 2:10: "And you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the *head* of all rule and authority." Here Paul emphasizes that Christ is the authority over not only the church, but over all rulers and authorities, over all powers in the universe.

(49) Colossians 2:18–19: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the *head*, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God." Here Paul encourages his readers not to abandon Christ in favor of serving angels. If they were to do so, they would be like members of a body abandoning the head of that body

[p.58]

because, Paul affirms, Christ is the only true "head" of the church. But again the idea of allegiance to Christ instead of to angels makes the mention of Christ as "authority over" the church an appropriate one in this context. Especially when we realize that the image of head involves not just authority but leadership, direction, guidance, and control, then the following idea of the whole body being knit together and growing together is appropriate. Whether the idea of "nourishing" carries an image of food that is transported through the mouth (a part of the head) to the rest of the body is not made clear here. If "source" were a common meaning for *head* elsewhere it might convey some such nuance in this passage also. But in fact no Greek-speaking reader would have thought of the sense "source" when reading κεφαλή, and that certainly is not the primary image or the one that caused Paul to mention "head" in this section.

At the end of this survey someone might raise one final objection. Someone might agree that our survey is correct in demonstrating that the sense "source" never occurred in Greek literature outside the Bible, but this person might still argue that "source" seems to "make sense" or "fit the context well" in certain New Testament passages. Therefore (it might be argued), we can still take κεφαλή to mean "source" in certain New Testament passages where that meaning seems to fit the context.

In response to such an argument, it must be said that it assumes a situation that simply could not have occurred. It assumes that Paul, when writing Ephesians (for example) to a large number of Christians in several churches in Asia Minor, would use a common word in a sense never before known in the Greek-speaking world and expect his readers to understand it, even though he gave them no explicit explanation that he was using the word in a new way. Furthermore, it assumes that the readers would think about and reject all the known senses of κεφαλή that were familiar to them, even though at least one of those senses ("authority over") would fit the context, and that after rejecting all the known senses they would somehow guess at the new sense in which Paul wanted it to be understood. But this is in fact an impossible

situation, one that simply could not occur in the ordinary process of written communication. Unless "source" can be shown to be a recognized meaning for κεφαλή in the Greek-speaking world, we are forced to conclude that Paul's readers would never have thought of that meaning instead of other recognized meanings in any New Testament context.

Given these instances of κεφαλή used to mean "ruler, authority over," we must conclude that its omission from the Liddell-Scott lexicon was an oversight that we hope will be corrected in the next edition. That would bring Liddell-Scott into agreement with all the standard Greek lexicons that specialize in the New Testament period.

We may wonder why the meaning "ruler, authority over" was not common in earlier Greek literature such as that from the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. (Most of our examples of the meaning "authority over" are from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D.) One explanation may be that the adjective κεφάλαιος ("head-like" or "of the head") functioned with this meaning instead. Thus, "the head-like person" (ὁ κεφάλαιος) could mean "the head person" or "the chief person." The Liddell-Scott lexicon lists under κεφάλαιος the following meanings: "Metaphorical, of persons,

[p.59]

*the head or chief.*" It then lists eight examples of this sense. Thus, because the adjective or the adjective used as a substantive could function with this meaning in an earlier period, there was perhaps no need for the noun κεφαλή to take a similar meaning. However, later in the development of the language, as our study demonstrates, the noun κεφαλή also came to take this sense. It certainly would have been readily understood, as the adjective κεφάλαιος demonstrates. (Note also the compound word κεφαλουργός, "foreman of works," Liddell-Scott.)

The survey of instances of κεφαλή used to mean "authority over" is complete. If we were to go beyond the time of the New Testament into the Patristic writings (only two of our extra-biblical quotations in the list above came from after the first century A.D.), we could greatly expand this list of examples. The use of κεφαλή to mean "authority over" is common in the early church Fathers.<sup>28</sup> But this survey is probably sufficient to demonstrate that "source, origin" is nowhere clearly attested as a legitimate meaning for κεφαλή, and that the meaning "ruler, authority over" has sufficient attestation to establish it clearly as a legitimate sense for κεφαλή in Greek literature at the time of the New Testament. Indeed, it was a well-established and recognizable meaning, and it is the meaning that best suits the New Testament texts that speak of the relationship between men and women by saying that the man is the "head" of a woman and the husband is the "head" of the wife.

---

© 1985 Trinity Journal & Moody Press. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in March 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

<sup>28</sup> See the examples in G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 1961), p. 749.