

A careful examination of the Greek word kephalē in the much disputed passage of I Corinthians 11:3—in which Paul speaks of Christ as the head of man, of man as the head of woman, and of God as the head of Christ—reveals that it does not mean “source” but indeed “leader,” or “ruler.”

***Kephalē* in I Corinthians 11:3**

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Having once studied the meaning of *kephalē* in I Corinthians 11:3,¹ I return to the subject to discuss it yet again. Such a discussion should be a suitable tribute to Paul Achtemeier on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday. He has always been interested in Pauline topics, and this further discussion may interest him still more. *Ad multos annos!*

The Greek text of I Corinthians 11:3 reads:

*thelō de hymas eidenai hoti
pantos andros hē kephalē ho Christos estin
kephalē de gynaikos ho aner,
kephalē de tou Christou ho theos.*

But I want you to understand that
Christ is the head of every man,
man is the head of woman,
and God is the head of Christ.

The meaning of *kephalē* in this passage has been much debated in recent times.² Since in verse 3 it cannot mean “head” in the physical, anatomical sense, as it does in verses 4, 5, 7, 10 of the same chapter, it must be used figuratively; but then does it mean “head,” like the head of a department, or does it mean “source,” like the source of a river? This is the debated issue.

Wayne Grudem investigated 2,336 instances in Greek literature from the eighth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. and concluded that there are 49 examples of its meaning “head” in the sense of a “ruler” or “one having authority over” someone else: 12 in the New Testament, 13 in the Septuagint, 5 from other Greek Old Testament translations, 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 Libanius, but no indisputable instances of its meaning “source” in these writers.

However, R. S. Cervin, in an article of markedly polemical tone, contested Grudem’s conclusions, dismissing the Pauline evidence as “illegitimate,” because the instances are themselves disputed, and dismissing the Septuagintal occurrences as “translations,” hence “influenced by the original language.” He also maintained that many of the instances from nonbiblical Greek literature before the Byzantine period were used only in a metaphorical sense and do not mean “ruler” outright. He concludes that *kephalē* does not mean “source” in Herodotus 4.91; perhaps also in *Orphic Fragment* 21–21A; Artemidorus Daldianus, 1.2; 1.35; 3.66; *Testament of Reuben* 2:2; and Philo, *De praemiis et poenis* 19 § 114; 20 § 125. In conclusion, he asked, “Does *kephalē* denote ‘authority over’ or ‘leader’? And he answered, “No. The only clear and unambiguous examples of such a meaning stem from the Septuagint and The Shepherd of Hermas, and the metaphor may very well have been influenced from Hebrew in the Septuagint.”³ Grudem then replied with a lengthy article, answering most of Cervin’s objections and discussing the data brought forth by other writers (B. and A. Mickelsen, R. A. Tucker, P. B. Payne, W. L. Liefeld, G. Bilezikian, C. C. Kroeger, G. D. Fee) and myself.⁴

My purpose now is to review this discussion in an irenic fashion and try to derive from it what seems to be certain about the meaning of *kephalē* in Greek literature and its bearing on the Pauline passage in question. I have also made use of the CD-ROM supplied by the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and checked many of the examples to corroborate my findings.

First, there are many instances in Greek literature where *kephalē* means “head” in the physical, anatomical sense (of a human being or an animal). Grudem counted 2,034 instances. This would be the sense of the word in I Corinthians 11:4, 5, 7, 10.

Second, there are also a good number of instances in which *kephalē* stands for the whole person, often being used in an apostrophe, for example, *philē kephalē*, “Dear Head” (Homer, *Iliad* 8.281; cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 264a; Euripides, *Rhesus* 226; Plutarch, *Moralia* 629d-e). This usage has no pertinence to the Pauline passage.

Third, *kephalē* has the sense of “source” in the following passages:

(a) Herodotus, *History* 4.91 (where *kephalai* is clearly used in conjunction with *pēgai*, “springs,” and hence means the “sources” of a river).

(b) *Orphic Fragment 21A* (where *kephalē* is used of Zeus as the “beginning” of all things; there a variant reading *archē* supports this meaning; and a scholion interprets it as *hōs poiētikon aition*, “as [the] producing cause”).⁵

(c) Philo, *De congressu quaerendae eruditionis gratia* 12 § 61 (where *kephalē* is used of Esau as the progenitor of a clan and is explained as *ho genarchēs estin Esau*).

(d) Philo, *De praemiis et poenis* 20 § 125 (where *kephalē* is used allegorically as the “source” of the spiritual life of good people in the human race).

(e) *Testament of Reuben* 2:2 (where *kephalē* is used in sense of the “origin” of deeds of rebellious youth).

(f) Artemidorus Daldianus, *Oneirocriticon* 1.2; 1.35; 3.66 (where *kephalē* is used metaphorically of a father as the “cause” or “source” of life).

(g) *Life of Adam and Eve* 19:3 (where *kephalē* is used in the sense of the “origin” of all sin).

These examples show that *kephalē* could indeed be used in the sense of “source.” Though it does not occur in as many instances as *kephalē* in the sense of “ruler, leader,” there is no reason to see it as the meaning intended in I Corinthians 11:3, as claimed by writers such as Barrett, Bruce, Cervin, Cope, Delobel, the Mickelsens, or Murphy-O’Connor.⁶ For the question still remains whether the meaning “source” suits the context of I Corinthians 11:3 or whether it is any better than the traditional understanding of *kephalē* as “leader, ruler.”

Fourth, *kephalē* has the meaning of “leader, ruler, person in authority” in the following passages:

(a) Plato, *Timaeus* 44d (where *kephalē* is used of the physical head of the human body, but Plato says of it, *ho theiotaton te estin kai tōn en hymin pantōn despotoun*, “which is the most divine [part] and governor of everything within us”).⁷

(b) LXX, Judges 11:11 (where *kephalē* is read and explained in ms. A by the added *hēgoumenon*, “leading,” and in ms. B by *archēgon*, “leader”).

(c) LXX, II Samuel 22:44 (where David praises God because he will preserve him, *eis kephalēn ethnōn*, “to be the head/leader of nations”).⁸

(d) LXX, Psalm 18:43 (where the same phrase occurs: *eis kephalēn ethnōn*).

(e) LXX, Isaiah 7:8–9 (where the son of Remaliah is called *kephalē Somorōn*, not just preeminent in Samaria, but its “head,” i.e., its leader).

(f) LXX, Jeremiah 38:7 (Hebrew 31:7), where *kephalēn ethnōn* occurs and the RSV translates it “the chief of the nations”).

(g) In four further instances the LXX uses the contrast between *kephalē*, “head,” and *oura*, “tail,” in a figurative sense: Deuteronomy 28:13, 44; Isaiah 9:13–14; 19:15 (here *kephalē* has the denotation of “authority” or “supremacy”).⁹

(h) Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.33 § 184 (where Philo explains the relation of the head to the body by saying *tēn tou sōmatos hēgemonian hē physis anēpse kephalē charisamenē*, “Nature conferred the leadership of the body on the head”).

(i) Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 4.4.3 § 261 (where Josephus calls Jerusalem *tēn kephalēn holou tou ethnous*, “the head of the whole nation,” by which he clearly means the capital or leading, not just preeminent, city in the nation).

(j) Pastor Hermae, *Similitudes* 7.3 (where the shepherd is considered to be *hē kephalē tou oikou*, “the head of the household”).

(k) Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 2.1 (where the general of an army is said to resemble the head of a body).

(l) Plutarch, *Cicero* 14.6 (where *kephalē* is used by Catiline of himself as the “head” of the republic, i.e., its leader).

(m) Plutarch, *Galba* 4.3 (where Galba is urged to become the *kephalē* of a strong province that was seeking a governor, i.e., one to rule over it).

(n) Libanius, *Oration* 20.3 (where *kephalē* is used in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; in the latter case it is used of “kings,” who are understood as “leaders”).

(o) Libanius, *Oration* 52.18 (where *kephalē* is again used of an emperor).

In addition to these instances, one might also mention a few instances where the meaning is not clear, whether one should understand it as “leader” or as “preeminent one.” Thus:

(p) Philo, *De vita Mosis* 2.5 § 30 (where Ptolemy II Philadelphus is called *kephalēn tropon tina tōn basileōn*, “in some sense the head of kings”).

(q) Philo, *De praemiis et poenis* 19 § 114 (where an individual or a city that is superior is likened to the head over a body).

In at least a dozen of the foregoing passages, then, *kephalē* clearly has the sense of “ruler” or “leader,” in some cases it is even so explained. This means that although *kephalē* does not occur in early Greek writings in the sense of “ruler, leader” or “person having authority over” someone or something, that meaning does begin to appear in Greek literature in the last pre-Christian centuries and at the beginning of the Christian era. Hence, there is little reason to doubt that a Hellenistic Jewish writer like Paul of Tarsus could have intended *kephalē* in I Corinthians 11:3 to have that meaning.

In five of the passages the term is found in the Septuagint.¹⁰ Cervin would write off this evidence, because such instances are translations of Hebrew *rōʾš*, and hence the meaning may be colored by the original. But the matter is not so simple. Even if the Greek translators of the Septuagint in most cases (109 out of 180 cases) translated *rōʾš* in the sense of “leader” as *archōn*, the few instances (perhaps 8 in all) in which they did not do so show that Greek *kephalē* could

tolerate such a meaning, otherwise, it would not have been so used by them

It is true that neither Liddell-Scott-Jones (9th ed),¹¹ nor Moulton-Milligan, nor Preisigke, nor Chantraine have listed *Kephale* in the sense of “ruler” or “leader” in their dictionaries¹² That meaning, however, is found in the dictionaries of F Passow¹³ and H van Herwerden¹⁴

Finally, we may terminate this overview by adding some of the ways that writers in the patristic period have used the word *kephale* or interpreted I Corinthians 11 3 Such writers may have derived what has been called the Byzantine sense of *kephale* from what they considered the figurative meaning of this Corinthian passage *Kephale* in the sense of “leader, ruler” is found in a passage of Athanasius that I have already quoted, which refers to some bishops as *kephalai tosouton ekklesion*, “heads of such great churches” (*Apol II contra Aranos* 89, PG 25 409A)¹⁵ To this example I add a few others Gregory of Nyssa refers to Peter and says of him *mnemoneuetai Petros he kephale ton apostolon*, “Peter, the head of the apostles, is recalled and with him the rest of the members of the church are glorified” (*Encomium in Sanctum Stephanum* 2 46, PG 46 733) Again, John Chrysostom, speaking of the emperor, says *Basileus gar esti koryphe kai kephale ton epi tes ges anthropon hapanton*, “For the king is the summit and head of all men on earth” (*Ad populum antiochenum* 2 2, PG 49 36) Similarly, he says of Antioch *ton gar poleon ton hypo ten heo kermenon kephale kai meter estin he polis he hemetera*, “Of all the cities that lie in the East our city is the head and mother” (*ibid* 3 1)¹⁶ Pseudo-Chrysostom asks about Peter *ho stylos tes ekklesias, he krepistes pisteos, he kephale tou chorou ton apostolon, ho Petros, ouk arnesato ton Christon kai hapax kai dis kai tris*, “Did not that pillar of the church, that foundation of faith, that head of the chorus of the apostles, deny Christ once and twice and thrice?” (*In Psalmum* 50, PG 55 581)

To such patristic use of *kephale* one would have to add the many places in patristic literature where comments are made on I Corinthians 11 3 or use of it is made In these places the sense of *kephale* as “leader, ruler, one having authority over” is clear To cite, for instance, Clement of Alexandria “Therefore the head is the leading part (*kephale tou nyn to hegemonikon*) And if [the] Lord is the head of the man, the man is the head of the woman” (*Stromateis* 4 8 63, GCS 52 277) Then Clement quotes Ephesians 5 21–25

In discussing the different parts of the high priest’s robes and headdress, Clement explains the mitre as symbol of the headship of Christ as *Logos*, by whom all was made and to whom all is subjected “It is the symbol of heaven made by the Word and subjected to Christ, the head of all things” (*Stromateis* 5 6 37, GCS 52 352)

When John Chrysostom comments on I Corinthians 11 3, he says,

as the man rules over the woman, so too the Father [rules over] Christ
Therefore just as Christ [rules over] the man, so too the Father rules over the

Son. For he says, "Christ is the head of every man" For if to the extent that the son is superior to us, to that extent the Father [is superior] to the Son, consider to what degree you will bring him (*In epistolam I ad Corinthus*, Homily 26.2; PG 61.214).

But Chrysostom significantly adds, "But who will stand for this?" then he explains.

. . . If [by "head"] Paul had meant to speak about rule and subjection, he would not have used the example of a wife, but that of a slave and a master. What does it matter if the wife is subject to us [men]? She is subject as a wife, as free, and as equal in honor. For with us it is reasonable for the wife to be subject to the husband, since equality of honor causes contention.

This clearly saves Chrysostom from being a misogynist, but it still reveals that he understood "head" as meaning "having authority over."

Given such a traditional interpretation of I Corinthians 11:3,¹⁷ one will have to marshal cogent and convincing arguments to say that Paul intended *kephālē* in that verse to mean "source" and not "one having authority over." Those who have claimed that "source" is the meaning intended by Paul have offered no other argument than their claim that *kephālē* would not have meant "ruler, leader, one having authority over" in Paul's day. The evidence brought forth above shows that it was certainly possible for a Hellenistic Jewish writer such as Paul to use the word in that sense. Hence, their argument has collapsed, and the traditional understanding has to be retained.

NOTES

1. "Another Look at *Kephālē* in 1 Corinthians 11.3," *NTS* 35 (1989), 503–11.
2. See S. Bedale, "The Meaning of *kephālē* in the Pauline Epistles," *JTS* 5 (1954), 211–25; R. Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 40 (1972), 283–303; "Paul: Chauvinist or Liberationist?" *CC* 89 (1972), 268–81; "Paul and the Eschatological Woman: Revisited," *JAAR* 42 (1974), 532–37; J. Murphy-O'Connor, "The Non-Pauline Character of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16?" *JBL* 95 (1976), 615–21; L. Cope, "1 Cor. 11:2–16: One Step Further," *JBL* 97 (1978), 435–36; B. and A. Mickelsen, "Does Male Dominance Tarnish Our Translations?" *Christianity Today* 23 (1978–79), 1312–18; J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Sex and Logic in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," *CBQ* 42 (1980), 482–500; W. Grudem, "Does *kephālē* ('Head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," *TrnJ* 6 (1985), 38–59; B. and A. Mickelsen, "What Does *kephālē* Mean in the New Testament?" *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, ed. B. and A. Mickelsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), pp. 97–110; R. A. Tucker, "A Response," *ibid.*, pp. 111–17; P. B. Payne, "Response," *ibid.*, pp. 118–32; W. L. Liefeld, "Women, Submission and Ministry in 1 Corinthians," *ibid.*, pp. 134–60, esp. pp. 136–48; J. Delobel, "1 Cor 11:2–16: Toward a Coherent Explanation," *L'Apôtre Paul: Personnalité, style et conception du ministère*, BETL 73,

ed A Vanhoye (Louvain Leuven University/Peeters, 1986), 369–89, J Murphy-O'Connor, "Interpolations in 1 Corinthians," *CBQ* 48 (1986), 81–94, esp 87–90, C C Kroeger, "The Classical Concept of *Head* as 'Source,'" *Equal to Serve*, ed G Gaebelein (Old Tappan, NJ Revell, 1987), pp 267–83, G D Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIC (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1987), pp 501–05, R E Cervin, "Does *kephale* Mean 'Source' or 'Authority over' in Greek Literature? A Rebuttal," *Tnnj* 10 (1989), 85–112, P Cotterell and M Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London SPCK, 1989), pp 141–45, W Grudem, "The Meaning of *kephale* ('Head') A Response to Recent Studies," *Tnnj* 11 (1990), 3–72, G Bilezikian, "A Critical Examination of Wayne Grudem's Treatment of *kephale* in Ancient Greek Texts," *Beyond Sex Roles*, 2d ed (Grand Rapids Baker, 1990) pp 215–52

3 Cervin, "Does *kephale* Mean," p 112

4 See the references in n 2 above

5 This text can also be found in Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica* 3 9 2

6 See references in n 2 above and also in *NTS* 35 (1989), 505–06

7 *Pace* Cervin, the fact that Plato uses here *despotoun* shows that he does not understand *kephale* merely as "the preeminent part of the human body" (p 95) It is clearly the part that exercises authority over the rest Even though Plato is speaking of the anatomical head, he attributes to it precisely the quality that is used in *kephale* meaning "ruler"

8 This phrase is often repeated in the writings of patristic authors, e g, Eusebius *De die dominica* 60, 79, 80, 146, 194

9 See my comments, *NTS* 35 (1989), 508–09

10 One might also add the occurrence of *kephale* in Judg 10 18, 11 8, 9, where the codices Alexandrinus, Coislmanus, and Basiliano-Vaticanus read it, whereas codex Vaticanus rather has *archon* Clearly the Greek scribe who produced the translation in those codices saw no difficulty in rendering Hebrew *ro'sh* in the sense of "leader" as *kephale*, the meaning that the Hebrew *ro'sh* has, "ruler, leader" of the inhabitants of Gilead

11 Under IV 3, *kephale* is defined as "head" of persons in the 7th and 8th editions of Liddel-Scott, as a Byzantine usage (p 801), a meaning that is omitted in the 9th edition

12 So Payne, "Response," pp 118–32

13 *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*, 2 vols (Leipzig Vogel, 1831), I 1270 "5) übertr Hauptperson"

14 *Lexicon graecum suppletorium et dialecticum*, 2 vols (Leiden Sythoff, 1910), p 797 "dux," citing Libanius, *Or* 52 18

15 See *NTS* 35 (1989), 510

16 Chrysostom's commentary on Isa 7 5–9, which I quoted in *NTS* 35 (1989), 507, and to which I referred previously, is worthy of attention, since it clearly shows that Chrysostom understood *kephale* in the sense of "having authority over" someone or something "*all' he kephale Aram Damaskos* " *he arche autou, phesin, he exousia autou en Damaskō stesetai kai peraterō ou probesetai* "*kai he kephale Damaskou Rhasen* " *kai ho archōn Damaskou, phesi, kai ho kratōn Rhasen estai, toutestin, en tous autou mener kai pleiona ou prosthesai dynamn autō* " "The head of Aram is Damascus' Sovereignty over it, he says, authority over it will stay in Damascus, and it will not spread beyond [it] 'And the head of Damascus is Rezin' The ruler of Damascus, he says, and the one who exercises authority will be Rezin, that is, he will remain in its [territory] and will not add to it further power" (*In Isaiam* 7 3, SC 304 306) Again, "*All' estai he kephale Ephraim,*" *toutestin, iōn deka phylōn, "he Samareia* " *ekei gar en he basileia kai ouk ektathesetai peraterō kai he kephale Samareias ho basileus tou Israel, hoper epi tou Damaskenou elege, touto kai entautha delōn, hoti ouden pleon hexousin, hon nyn katechousin,* " "But the head of Ephraim,' that is, of the ten tribes, 'will be Samaria' For there was their kingship, and it will not spread beyond [it] And the head of Samaria is

the king of Israel. What he said about the Damascene, that he declares here too, that they will not have more than what they now have" (*ibid.*).

17. To the evidence of the Greek patristic writers cited, one could also cite many Latin writers of the same period, who explain I Cor. 11:3 or use a phrase from it, to show the traditional meaning. I have not cited this evidence in the body of the article, because Latin *caput* clearly had the figurative sense of "ruler, leader, one having authority over." The *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968–82), p. 275, cites many instances in classical Latin literature of *caput* in the sense of "the prime mover or leader (in any action), ring-leader, principal" (§ 13) and also in the sense of "the leading person or persons (in a state, confederacy, etc., § 14). As an example of Latin writers in the patristic period one could cite Tertullian *Adversus Marcionem*, 5.8.1: "*Caput um Christus est. Quis Christus? Qui non est um auctor? Caput enim ad auctoritatem posuit, auctoritas autem non alterius est quam auctoris*" (CCLat 1.685). See further the article of Tucker, "Response."



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