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WHAT DID the Apostle Paul mean when he wrote, "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body" (Eph. 5:23)? And, "The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3)?

Discussion about the biblical role for men in church, society, and home is based on these verses. The meaning of these verses rests largely on the meaning of the Greek word *kephale*, translated "head" in the New Testament.

One possible way the word "head" is used today means leader, chief, or director. We say, "He is the head of his company," or, "He is the department head." In husband-wife and male-female relations this

idea popularly carries over to suggestions of authority. The husband is said to be the boss of the family. Before we accept that idea, we must ask what the Greek word *kephale* (head) meant to Paul and to his readers.

To find the answer, we must first ask whether "head" in ancient Greek normally meant "superior to" or "one having authority." In the first half of this article we will introduce three kinds of evidence:

1. Lexicographers Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie (*A Greek-English Lexicon*, ninth edition, Clarendon Press, 1940, a really comprehensive Greek lexicon) give no evidence of such a meaning.

2. The Septuagint translators took pains to use different words than "head" (*kephale*) when the Hebrew word for head implied "superior to" or "authority over."

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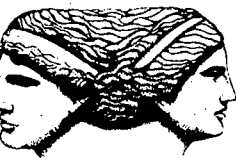
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3. In his commonly used lexicon (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., U. of Chicago Press, 1957/1979), Walter Bauer gives little or no salient support for such meaning outside of his personal interpretation of five Pauline passages in the New Testament.

In the second half of the article, we will answer the
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fundamental question: If "head" does not normally mean "superior to" or "authority over," what does it mean in those seven New Testament passages where Paul uses it figuratively?

FIRST, WHAT about the differences in the lexicons? One of the most complete Greek lexicons (covering Homeric, classic, and *koinē* Greek) is the work by Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie. It is based on examination of thousands of Greek writings from the period of Homer (about 1000 B.C.) to about A.D. 600, which, of course, includes New Testament times. Significantly, for our purposes here, it does not include "final authority," "superior rank," or anything similar as meanings of *kephale*. Apparently ordinary readers of Greek literature would not think of such meanings when they read "head."

However, another commonly used lexicon is the *koinē* Greek lexicon by Arndt and Gingrich (usually called Bauer's). It does list "superior rank" as a possible meaning for *kephale*. It lists five passages in the New Testament where the compiler thinks *kephale* has this meaning. As support for this meaning in New Testament times, the lexicon lists two passages from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, where *kephale* implies leadership or authority.

Those who support Bauer's view that *kephale* meant "superior rank" point to these passages in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as evidence that this meaning of *kephale* was familiar to Greek-speaking people in New Testament times.

However, the facts do not support that argument. About 180 times in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ro'sh* (head) is used with the idea of chief, leader, superior rank (similar to the way English-speaking people use "head"). However, those who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek (between 250 and 150 B.C.) rarely used *kephale* (head) when the Hebrew word for head carried this idea of leader, chief, or authority. They usually used the Greek word *archon*, meaning leader, ruler, or commander. They also used other words. In only 17 places (out of 180) did they use *kephale*, although that would have been the simplest way to translate it. Five of those 17 have variant readings, and another 4 involve a head-tail metaphor that would make no sense without the use of head in contrast to tail. That leaves only 8 instances (out of 180 times) when the Septuagint translators clearly chose to use *kephale* for *ro'sh* when it had a "superior rank" meaning. Most are in relatively obscure places.

Since *kephale* is so rarely used when *ro'sh* carried the idea of authority, most of the Greek translators apparently realized that *kephale* did not carry the same "leader" or "superior rank" meaning for "head" as did the Hebrew word *ro'sh*.

There are seven passages in the New Testament where Paul uses *kephale* in some figurative sense. The concept of a hierarchy, with men in a role of authority over women (at least over their wives) rests largely on two of these: 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:23. When Paul used *kephale* in these two passages, was he thinking of one of the usual Greek meanings of head, or

a common figurative Hebrew meaning?

Paul knew both Hebrew and Greek. Although he was a Pharisee who knew Hebrew well, he grew up in Tarsus, a Greek-speaking city. Greek was his native tongue. In all the passages where he used *kephale*, he was writing to Greek-speaking people in cities where most Christians were converts from Greek religions. Their contact with the Old Testament would be limited to hearing parts of the Septuagint read in their services. They might go to church for years without ever hearing those eight relatively obscure places in the Greek Old Testament where *kephale* seemed to have a different meaning from the usual meanings in their own language.

Since Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew, he would likely write to Greek-speaking Christians using Greek words with Greek meanings they would easily understand.

IF "HEAD" in Greek did not normally mean "supreme over" or "authority over," what did it mean in those seven New Testament passages where Paul used it figuratively? Careful examination of context shows that common Greek meanings not only make good sense, but present a more exalted Christ.

1. Colossians 1:18 (context 1:14-20); *kephale* means "exalted originator and completer." "He (Christ) is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent." Paul seems to be using *kephale* with common Greek meanings—"source or beginning or completion" (Liddell, Scott, et al.—in a sense that Christ is the exalted originator and completer of the church. Bauer does not list this passage among those where *kephale* means "superior rank."

2. Colossians 2:19 (context 2:16-19); *kephale* means "source of life." Christ is the source of life who nourishes the church. Christians are told to hold fast to Christ, who is described as the "head," from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God." Bauer agrees that in this passage *kephale* does not mean "superior rank."

3. Ephesians 4:15 (context 4:11-16) is very similar to Colossians 2:19. It reads, "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." This passage stresses the unity of head and body, and presents Christ as the nourisher and source of growth. Bauer classifies *kephale* here as meaning "superior rank," although he does not see that meaning in the very similar Colossians 2:19.

4. 1 Corinthians 11:3 (context 11:2-16); *kephale* seems to carry the Greek concept of head as "source, base, or derivation." "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (NIV). In this passage Paul is discussing how men and women should pray and prophesy in public church meetings. His instructions apparently relate to the customs, dress, and lifestyle in Corinth and the tendency of the Corinthian

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believers to be disorderly. Paul discusses women's and men's head coverings and hair styles. (Veils are not mentioned in the Greek text.) Paul says, "man was not made from woman, but woman from man" (v. 8); he also says, "woman was made from man" (v. 12). This suggests that Paul used "head" in verse 3 with the meaning of "source or origin." Man was the "source or beginning" of woman in the sense that woman was made from the side of Adam. Christ was the one through whom all creation came (1 Cor. 8:6b). God is the base of Christ (John 8:42: "I proceeded and came forth from God").

When we recognize one Greek meaning of *kephale* as source or origin, as Paul explains in verses 8 and 12, then verse 3 does not seem to teach a chain of command. Paul's word order also shows he was not thinking of chain of command: Christ, head of man; man, head of woman; God, head of Christ. Those who make it a chain of command must rearrange Paul's words. In fact, Paul seems to go out of his way to show that he was not imputing authority to males when he says, "For as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (1 Cor. 11:12).

5. Ephesians 5:23 (context 5:18-23); "head" is used in a head-body metaphor to show the unity of husband and wife and of Christ and the church. "For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body." Paul often used the head-body metaphor to stress the unity of Christ and the church. In fact, this unity forms the context for this passage. The head and body in nature are dependent on each other.

This verse follows Paul's explanation of what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. His last instruction is, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). This is addressed to all Christians and obviously includes husbands and wives. Naturally, as part of this mutual submission of all Christians to each other, wives are to submit to their husbands.

The Greek word "submit" or "be subject to" does not appear in verse 22. It says only, "wives to your husbands." The verb supplied must therefore refer to the same kind of submission demanded of all Christians in verse 21.

To stress the oneness of husband and wife, Paul then returns to his favorite head-body metaphor: "For the husband is the head (*kephale*) of the wife as Christ is the head (*kephale*) of the church, his body."

Paul develops his head-body metaphor at length in 1 Corinthians 12:22-27. If he thought of "head" as the part of the body that had authority over the rest of it, would not that meaning appear in this long passage? We know that the brain controls the body. But Paul did not use that concept in his metaphor. He refers to the ears, eyes, and nose; the head as a whole is mentioned only in verse 21: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" Paul taught here the unity and mutual dependence of all parts on each other: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (v. 26). There is no suggestion that the head has authority over other parts of the body.

Christ does have authority over the church (Matt. 16:18). But most of the passages that deal with Christ as the head of the church do not point to his authority over

the church, but rather the oneness of Christ and the church. In Ephesians 5:18-33, this oneness is applied to husband and wife.

If we are to see a meaning in "head" in Ephesians 5:23 beyond the head-body metaphor of mutual dependence and unity, we must do so on the basis of the immediate context. Christ's headship of the church is described like this: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (v. 25). Christ gave himself up to enable the church to become all that it is meant to be—holy and without blemish.

As Christ is the enabler (the one who brings to completion) of the church, so the husband is to enable (bring to completion) all that his wife is meant to be. The husband is to nourish and cherish his wife as he does his own body, even as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church (v. 29).

The concept of sacrificial self-giving so that a spouse can achieve full potential has been the role that society has traditionally given to the wife. Here Paul gives it to the husband. Of course, giving oneself sacrificially for the other is an excellent example of the submission wives and husbands are to have toward each other (v. 21).

6. Ephesians 1:20-23 (context 1:13-23); *kephale* means "top or crown." Paul presents an exalted picture of Christ and his authority over everything in creation: "... when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all." The authority of Christ, established in verses 20-21, is extended to every extremity from crown (head) to feet—including the church which is his body.

7. Colossians 2:10 (context 2:8-15); *kephale* again seems to have the Greek idea of life-source, as well as the idea of top or crown. This verse emphasizes the church as the "fulness" of Christ. "For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (vv. 9-10).

Paul uses two metaphors here—the head-body metaphor, with the church coming to "fulness of life" in Christ (the life-source, nourisher, enabler), and also the concept of top or crown when he speaks of Christ as the head of all rule and authority. In these two passages, "top" or "crown" emphasize Christ's position by virtue of the cross and resurrection. He is the victor, and is crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:9; Ps. 8:5).

These are the only passages in the New Testament where *kephale* is used figuratively. They include the five given by Bauer as examples of *kephale* meaning "superior rank," despite the fact that such a meaning for *kephale* does not appear in the secular Greek of New Testament times. If Paul had been thinking about authority, or leader, there were easily understood Greek words he could have used, and which he did use in other places. He used *exousia* (authority) in Romans 13:1-2; and *archon* in Romans 13:3.

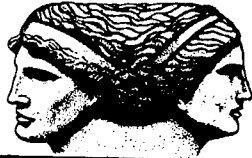
The passages where Paul used *kephale* in a figurative
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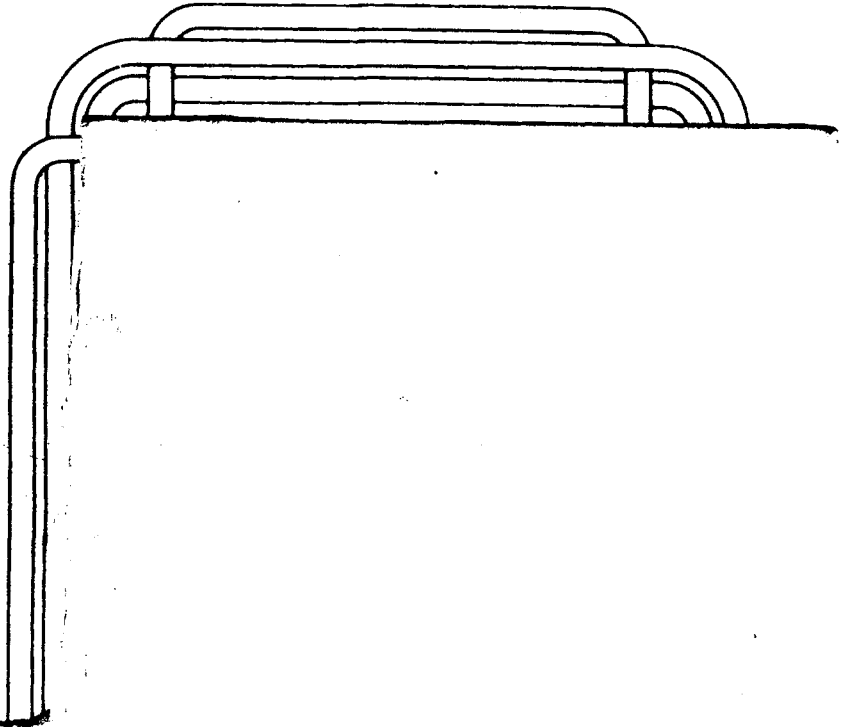
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way make better sense and present a more exalted, completed view of Christ when *kephale* is read with recognized Greek meanings that would have been familiar to his original readers. Among these meanings are: exalted originator and completer; source, base, derivation; enabler (one who brings to completion); source of life; top or crown.

Can we legitimately read an English or Hebrew meaning into the word "head" in the New Testament, when both context and secular Greek literature of New Testament times seem to indicate that "superior rank" or "authority over" were not meanings that Greeks associated with the word, and probably were not the meanings the apostle Paul had in mind? Has our misunderstanding of some of these passages been used to support the concept of male dominance that has ruled most pagan and secular societies since the beginning of recorded history? Has this misunderstanding also robbed us of the richer, more exalted picture of Christ that Paul was trying to give us?



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