

Interpreting Kephālē (Head) in Ephesians 5:23

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

... ..

*And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'*

Robert Frost, *Mending Wall*, 1914

The author of this short paper has followed with interest the prevalent complementarian/egalitarian controversy of the last 40 years concerning gender and authority and ministry. Much of the available literature and blogging delves deeply into extrabiblical sources, which, of course, is entirely legitimate. More recently, though, there have been calls to let the Bible speak for itself. Thus, this paper surveys evidence from the Bible alone, but, of course, is mindful of the wider scholarship. It looks only at one word (head, *kephalē* in Greek) in a single verse (Ephesians 5:23), and its connection to a key Old Testament verse (Psalm 118:22) and the Hebrew word for head there, *rōsh*.

For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour (Ephesians 5:23).

Let's look at the whole passage to get context. Note that this context starts before v.23 and even before v.22. Verse 21 might do, but it's mid-sentence, so let's start at v.15.

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ **For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.** ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (NIV)

We note that v.23 is surrounded by v.21-22 ‘... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord’, and v.25 ‘Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...’, and other verses. The context is love in response to Christ’s love. This clear truth is vital – if the complementarian case is to have integrity, it must insist that biblical headship is an act of love, and if in practice it is not so, then it is tyranny, not biblical headship. The complementarian view is widely held, by those of the other persuasion, to be hard of heart, and is frequently portrayed as such. But if the complementarian viewpoint is biblical, as this writer believes, then all despotic implementation of it must be abhorred. The reality is that there are countless marriages (and churches) where complementarian headship is willingly and contentedly accepted and practised by all, and where love rules.

The word ‘head’ in v.23 translates the Greek word *kephalē*. In the NT, *kephalē* nearly always means *head*, for example ‘*the hairs of your head are all numbered*’ (Matthew 10:30). It occurs about 70 times and on about ten occasions its meaning is not an actual head of a human or animal.

The first, and most important of these is Matthew 21:42, where Jesus claims this:

- ‘*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*’ (ESV, literally ‘**head** [*kephalē*] of the corner’).¹
or: *The stone which the builders rejected, the same [i.e. the stone] is become the head of the corner* (KJV).

All other examples of *kephalē* meaning other than an anatomical head in the NT follow here:

- Mark’s recording of Matthew 21:42, ‘*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone*’, Mark 12:10 (Greek is the same as in Matthew 21);
- Luke likewise, Luke 20:17, again identical wording; the following v.18 is a quotation from Isaiah 8:14,15, also quoted by Paul in Romans 9:33 and by Peter in 1 Peter 2:8, ‘... *and he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.*’
- Peter’s quotation of Matthew 21:42 in Acts 4:11, ‘*This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone*’ (‘**head** [*kephalē*] of the corner’ again);
- Peter’s quotation of the same in 1 Peter 2:7 (followed by the Isaiah 8:14,15 quotation again);
- St Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:3, ‘... *the head* [*kephalē*] *of every man is Christ, the head* (*kephalē*) *of a wife is her husband, and the head* [*kephalē*] *of Christ is God.*’ Note: ‘man’ here is *anēr*, meaning the male man or husband, as distinct from the ‘wife’ or ‘woman’ (*gunē*), and as distinct from *anthrōpos* (a male or female human being);
- St Paul in Ephesians 1:22, ‘*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head* [*kephalē*] *over*² *all things to the church*’;

1 Although Matthew quotes the Greek Septuagint version of the OT, the syntax is Hebrew. It is *the* head of *the* corner, not *a* head or *any* corner, or heads or corners generally.

2 Note, the Greek preposition *huper* here is rendered ‘over’, quite properly, because (a) it is in apposition to the preceding *hupo*, ‘under’, and (b) it takes the accusative case of ‘all things’, not the genitive; thus attempts to translate *huper* as the alternative ‘on behalf of’ founder.

- Similarly in Colossians 1:18, '*And he is the **head** [kephalē] of the body, the church. He is the beginning [archē] and the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*' Note here the '**head of the body**' is a figurative use of the anatomical terms; *archē* means *beginning* or *origin* but carries the meaning of *authority*, as the prefix *arch-* does in English; *firstborn* in the culture of that time conveys highest dignity, supremacy and privilege, especially of primogeniture, and hence the ensuing word 'preeminent';³
- Colossians 2:10, '*... and in Christ you have been brought to fulness. He is the **head** [kephalē] over every power [archē again] and authority*';
- Colossians 2:18-19, '*Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the **Head** [kephalē], from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.*'

It is noteworthy that in all these examples *kephalē* implies *authority*, and a privileged status. In Colossians 2:19 the *Head* is clearly Christ, but alludes again to the head's controlling/coordinating role over the body (*sōma*).⁴

Kephalē never means *source* explicitly in the NT although it is used extra-biblically for a river's source (or the head of a valley; see also one use of *head* meaning a river source in the OT below).⁵ It can also mean (extra-biblically) things that convey head/height/uppermost/most significant, such as above, origin (of a muscle/river/valley), foremost, extremity, flower, bulb, starting point, consummation, sum, total, primary place, top, summit. The concept of 'sum' and 'beginning' are conveyed powerfully in Jesus's claim to be alpha and omega, i.e. the beginning and end, the sum total of all things.

But it has been asked, why did Paul in Ephesians 5:23 not use other words that imply leader or ruler, such as *archōn* etc? The answer lies in that Paul, a Hebrew who knows his Bible, is alluding to the use of *kephalē* in Psalm 118:22, as several times quoted in the NT, especially in Jesus's claim that it is fulfilled in Him, '*The stone that the builders rejected, this [stone] has become the cornerstone [or **head of the corner**].*' The Hebrew word for head is *rōsh*, which, together with other words from the same root, occurs about 800 times in the OT. When this word in any of its forms is used in the OT, it standardly means 'head', most commonly in its anatomical sense,⁶ or by a figurative use thereof, or, derivatively, it conveys the idea of source or origin,⁷ or primacy or supremacy (such as in the summit

3 '... from the dead ...' refers to Jesus being the first to rise from the dead, e.g. Acts 26:23, '... by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles', and 1 Corinthians 15:20, '... the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.' John says the same in Revelation 1:5, '... Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead ...'.

4 The physicians and philosophers of ancient Greece, and almost certainly the Hebrews, knew well that the *kephalē* had pre-eminence over the *sōma*. There exists confusion between what the ancients believed to be the seat of cognition and reasoning (the head, which is the only part of the body that bears all the sense organs) and the seat of emotions, variously the heart (which the Hebrews believed controlled also the will), or the kidneys, liver or guts (collectively or separately, Gr: *splanchnoi*, as in Philemon 12, 'I am sending ... my very *heart*', and 2 Corinthians 7:15, 'And his *affection* for you ...'). Plato, Galen (a famous second century AD Greek physician who worked in Rome) and others believed the head and its brain to lodge rationality. That the intestines might have a part in emotion is retained to this day in 'gut feeling' and 'butterflies in the stomach', likewise heart. Modern medical Greek derives mostly from Galen, and *kephalē* appears in terms such as encephalograph, encephalitis, etc. Also the biceps and quadriceps muscles (but here it is Latin) have two and four heads or origins.

5 The idea that *kephalē* in Ephesians 5:23 might mean '*source*' is quite old, but originally it did not connote source of love; rather, Adam was the source of Eve. But Eve owes everything to God, not Adam. The idea did not develop further until the concept of '*source of love*' appeared.

6 E.g., See Genesis 40:16 in the list below.

7 See Genesis 2:10 below, the source of rivers flowing out of Eden.

of a mountain).⁸ It can mean best or choicest or finest. It can mean chief or beginning or first, or end (of an object). It can mean sum total or head count (census). Whatever the exact shade of meaning we give to any use of ‘head’ in the OT, taking its context into account, whether it is origin, or authority, or foremost or beginning, or whatever, if A is the head of B, then B owes everything to A. A tulip flowering in the spring owes its very existence to the bulb below ground; the river owes everything to the spring whence it flows, the one under authority owes due obeisance to the one in authority, anything ongoing owes its continuance to its beginning, and so on. ‘Head’, therefore, does not have a scattering of independent meanings; rather, there is this commonality of pre-eminence in some sense throughout its semantic range. Because of this, attempts to make the word ‘head’ mean ‘source’ (instead of connoting authority) all founder, because source still connotes primacy.

Here are some examples of the various OT usages of *rōsh*:

- Genesis 8:5b, ‘... on the first day of the month, the **tops** [*rōsh*] of the mountains were seen’;
- Genesis 40:16, ‘I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my **head** [*rōsh*]’;
- Exodus 6:25, ‘These are the **heads** [*rōsh*] of the fathers’ houses of the Levites by their clans’;⁹
- Deuteronomy 1:13,15, ‘... appoint them as your **heads** [*rōsh*] ...’ (Septuagint, *govern*, elsewhere *archōn* or *archegos* in Deuteronomy, e.g. 33:5 ‘... when the **heads** [*rōsh* in Hebrew, *archōn* in LXX] of the people were gathered ...’);
- Exodus 12:2, ‘This month shall be for you the **beginning** [*rōsh*] of months. It shall be the **first** [*rōsh*] month of the year’;
- Psalm 111:10, ‘The fear of the Lord is the **beginning** [*rōsh*] of wisdom’;
- Exodus 18:25, ‘Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them **heads** [*rōsh*] over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens’ [‘chiefs’ is a different word meaning rulers];
- Exodus 30:12, ‘When you take the **census** [*rōsh*] of the people of Israel’ [note, here it means a **sum** or sum-total, a theme we referred to earlier in the alpha and omega concept – and see next example below];
- Psalm 119:160a, ‘The **sum** [*rōsh*] of your word is truth’ – Interestingly, this is in the *Resh* section of Psalm 119¹⁰ (v.153-160), which is about rescue, redemption, salvation. The word *rōsh* in v.160 is rendered ‘sum’ in the ESV, but translated ‘beginning’ in KJV: ‘Thy

8 E.g., Genesis 8:5, where the Hebrew uses *rōsh*, and the Greek Septuagint uses *kephalē*, for the mountain tops.

9 In the Septuagint (LXX), alternative appropriate words are used for *rōsh*, as well as *kephalē*. Common are words with the Greek ‘*arch-*’ root where the context is *chief* or *ruler*. E.g. in Exodus 18:25 *rōsh* is translated ‘military commander’, ‘head’ or ‘leader’ in English, with other military terms; in Exodus 6:25 *rōsh* is translated *arch-*, *head* in English; The ‘*arch-*’ words frequently translate Hebrew words that are rendered *prince*, *in charge of*, *lord over*, *governor*, *royal*, *chief*, *leader*, *ruler*, *king*, *etc.*, in English. E.g. In 1 Samuel 10:1 the ‘*arch-*’ word translates the Hebrew for *ruler* or *prince*. There are several examples where *rōsh* is translated *kephalē* when not an anatomical head: In Judges 11:8,9,11 *kephalē* translates *rōsh* along with another word meaning ‘govern’; ‘head’ and ‘leader’ in English. In 2 Samuel 22:44 *kephalē* translates *rōsh*, *head [of the nations or heathen]* in English; Psalm 18:43 is very similar. In 2 Kings 2:3 *kephalē* translates *rōsh*, ‘from over you’ or ‘from your head’ in English. In Psalm 110:6 *kephalē* translates *rōsh*, *chiefs*, *heads* or *rulers* in English. In Song of Songs 4:8 *rōsh* (*summit*) is translated in the Septuagint once by *arch-* and once by *kephalē*. In Isaiah 7:8,9 *kephalē* translates *rōsh* three times, *head of Syria*, etc in English. In Lamentations 1:5 *kephalē* translates *rōsh*, ‘[... foes have become her] head/chief/masters’ in English.

10 Psalm 119 consists of 22 sections of 8 verses each, the eight verses of each stanza all beginning with the same letter, in alphabetic sequence. Verses 153-160 begin with the letter *Resh*, the twentieth letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

word is true from the **beginning**', and 'archē'¹¹ (*beginning*) in Septuagint, v.160. NIV obscures the word *rōsh* ('All your words are true ...');

- Exodus 30:23, 'Take the **finest** [*rōsh*] spices';
- Exodus 38:17, 'The overlaying of their **capitals** [*rōsh*] was also of silver';
- Judges 7:20, 'Then the three **companies** [*rōsh*] blew the trumpets' [note, here it conveys importance and authority];
- 1 Samuel 28:2, 'I will make you my **bodyguard** [*rōsh* of my guardians] for life';
- Job 22:12, 'See the **highest** stars, how lofty they are!'. Highest here [ESV and NIV, *height of* in KJV] is simply *rōsh*.

Interestingly, the Hebrew 'head' word forms the core of the first word in the Bible, which simply means 'In the **beginning** ...'.

Its second use of in the Bible is unusual, in Genesis 2:10, 'a river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four **headwaters**' (NIV). KJV has **heads**. ESV just has *rivers*. The meaning is the head of a valley, the beginning or source of a river (leaving aside the geophysical difficulty of this verse). This is the only use of 'head' meaning a river's source. It never means source on any other occasion in the OT. *Source* of water (or any fluid including blood) is frequently rendered by the Hebrew word for a spring. That said, this unique use of the Hebrew for 'head' meaning 'source' is not at variance with other uses, as argued above.¹²

In the third use of 'head' in the Bible, the meaning really is an anatomical head, but not human or even mammal, rather the head of a slivery animal, the serpent of Genesis 3:15, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your **head**, and you shall bruise his heel'.¹³

We notice that in all these variant translations of *rōsh* and cognate words, the meaning always conveys headship, leadership, priority, beginning or excellence.

Now we shall look at the key OT verse, Psalm 118:22, quoted several times in the NT, including Ephesians 5:23: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the **cornerstone**'.

Word by word, this reads: *The stone the builders rejected is **head**¹⁴ of the corner*, but the expression 'head of the corner' is the Hebrew language way of representing 'cornerstone'. KJV translates this as *head stone of the corner* (*stone* is not there but it is assumed), ESV and NIV *cornerstone* [note that 'head' is not there in the English]. But let us now ask, what does the term 'cornerstone' or 'head of the corner' mean in its ancient context?

11 *Archē* can mean *origin* (e.g. John 1:1,2, Hebrews 1:10 quoting Psalm 102:25 'In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth ...' where Septuagint has *archē*), *power*, *authority*, *headship* (e.g. Jude 7 '... their position of authority ...'). Septuagint has *archē* for the *heads* of the four rivers of Genesis 2:10.

12 Given that Paul was writing from the Hebrew mindset (but probably with Greek as his first language, though he also knew Hebrew) it is scarcely likely that he intends 'source' as the intended meaning of *kephalē*; it simply doesn't work in context. But that notwithstanding, it is immaterial anyway – 'source' connotes primacy, as we have shown.

13 In the Genesis accounts of the creation and fall there is no concept of man dominating woman. The order of creation is written into the text. That woman was tempted and sinned first represents Satan subverting God's order (as St Paul explains in 1 Timothy 2:13-14). It is a captious argument that women sin more easily than men.

14 Note that the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT translates *rōsh* as *kephalē*.

Psalm 118 is a psalm of thanksgiving, referring to God's timeless loving kindness, exhibited in the psalmist's rescue from distress (v.5, '*Out of my distress ...*'). The Hebrew word '*chesed*', often translated by expressions such as 'loving kindness' or 'steadfast love', and connoting God's tender-hearted covenant loyalty to his people, is used several times in this psalm, referencing God's love, help, refuge, strength, gate (to righteousness), and salvation (v.14, '*The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation*') is a quotation of Israel's song of victory after the Red Sea crossing, Exodus 15:2, and referenced in Isaiah 12:2). The attack on him has been personal and furious and, although surrounding nations are referred to, the attack is probably from within Israel, but, like a fire being extinguished, the attackers are driven back and the fire goes out. The Messianic nature of this psalm is clear. In our v.22 the ring of foes are the builders themselves, those in power in Israel (see Isaiah 28 later). In Psalm 118:22, there is one particular foundation stone in mind, and one only. It is prophetic of (and the type of) Jesus Christ, the one and only cornerstone on which His Church is built.

The idea of cornerstone was well understood by the Hebrews of the time. The concept occurs in the ancient book of Job: Job 38:4-6 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone?'

The final Hebrew phrase here ends with '*stone of the corner*'.¹⁵ This is the language of building – foundation, stretched a line (measurement, levelling), footings. Actually it is here the language of creation. Creation and salvation are inextricably linked. Note the final clause of Ephesians 5:23 is '*... the head ... is himself its saviour*'.

Other uses of *cornerstone* in the OT are:

- Isaiah 28:16, '*... therefore thus says the Lord God,*¹⁶ "*Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: Whoever believes will not be in haste.*"' Again, we have the concept of laying a foundation, this time pointing forward to the identity of the cornerstone, our saviour who claims to be that very stone. The 'builders' of the day rejected the cornerstone for their 'refuge of lies' (v.15).
- Jeremiah 51:26, '*No stone shall be taken from you for a corner and no stone for a foundation, but you shall be a perpetual waste, declares the Lord.*' Note the negativity here; Jeremiah is speaking of Babylon, a people in defiant rebellion.

And in 1 Peter 2:6 (preceding v.7,8 mentioned earlier, and quoting the Septuagint), quoting Isaiah 28:16 above, '*For it stands in Scripture: Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.*' This confirms that cornerstone in the OT looks forward to Christ who himself proves to be that cornerstone in fulfilment of the OT promise.

The *head of the corner* or *cornerstone* clearly does not mean a capstone. It implies foundation, the foremost stone to be laid that defines a building's position and orientation. The final completed structure owes its existence, in a real sense, to the foundation stone – or to put it another way, the foundation stone has primacy – without it there is no building.

15 The Hebrew for '*stone*' is '*eben*' and is found, for example, in the name *Ebenezer, stone of help*).

16 *Lord God* is common and renders *Adonai Yahweh*. *Yahweh* is otherwise usually rendered *LORD*.

Our exploration of *kephalē*, looking also at concepts of foundation, creation and salvation, and looking at all the use of the word *head* in the Bible suggests to us that *kephalē* never means anything other than *head* or *chief* or *primacy* or *pre-eminence*.

Earlier in Ephesians Paul writes, Ephesians 2:19,20, '*... household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*'.¹⁷ Likewise the vocabulary of Colossians 1:18 above cannot be overlooked. Christ is the *head*, the *beginning*, the *firstborn*, *pre-eminent*. Therefore, *kephalē* in the second clause of Ephesians 5:23, describing Christ as the head of the church, cannot denote anything other than authority and primacy; thus equally the first clause, assigning a parallel headship to the husband in a marriage, must entail a complementarian understanding of the respective roles of husband and wife in marriage (and by extension of the minister in a church fellowship). This is important: time after time the word 'head' applied to Christ denotes his authority; in Ephesians 5:23, the clause '*as Christ is the **head** of the church*' certainly speaks of Christ's supremacy and authority. It can scarcely be held that the preceding clause, '*the husband is the **head** of the wife*' requires a different understanding of 'head'.

But dominance is not there in the biblical doctrine of headship either, because the headship conveyed here is a sacrificial, loving headship. The author wonders why anything else has been taught. In decades of listening to sermons, never has this author heard any other interpretation. Two verses earlier Paul writes '*submit to one another*'. There needs to be no divide between complementarianism and egalitarianism. They are part of the same arrangement ordered by the creator. Submission does not mean submitting to a despot. Headship does not mean authoritarian tyranny. Christ loved the church by giving his life for her, which is exactly the point of Ephesians 5:25 ('*Husbands, love your wives*'). If a God-given headship role is practised abusively, by manipulative, emotionally controlling husbands (or, in a church, by ministers), then it is emphatically not biblical headship. But put into practice with self-giving, self-denying, self-sacrificing love, then it becomes a reflection of the ultimate self-giving love of Christ.

Biologically, endocrinologically, anatomically and emotionally, women and men are complementary. In God's eyes they are also equal. But in his created order God does define a sacrificial headship role to the male, and we cannot argue that this is other than 'God's holy ordinance' as the Book of Common prayer puts it.¹⁸

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This paper has been peer reviewed.

The author thanks the following for their assistance:

The Revd Dr Vernon Wilkins, PhD, MA(Hons, Cantab), MA(Hons, Oxon)
and the Revd Dr Colin Kruse, PhD, MPhil, BDiv, scholar emeritus at Melbourne School of Theology.

17 Needless to say, the various Greek renderings of *cornerstone* are best attempts at expressing the Hebrew concept of the prime foundation stone of a building.

18 The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony, Book of Common Prayer.