

# Toward an Understanding of Ancient Conceptions of “Head”<sup>1</sup>

CATHERINE CLARK KROEGER

For nearly two thousand years, an elegant country villa lay buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Located some three miles from Pompeii, the Villa Oplontis escaped the attention of archaeologists until the beginning of excavations in the last part of the twentieth century.

Now the splendid country residence emerges in a remarkable state of preservation, the colors of its frescoes still fresh and vibrant. The property belonged to the estate of someone in the family of the Emperor Nero's second wife, Poppea, perhaps to the lady herself. Poppea appears to have been vehemently hostile to nascent Christianity and may have been the instigator of Nero's decision to launch a persecution against those whom he declared responsible for the burning of Rome.

Though Nero's family made bad spiritual choices, the artistic taste is impeccable with which the Villa Oplontis is decorated. It contains remarkable examples of Roman fresco art, the painting upon wet plaster of art motifs and scenes. Depicted are mythological figures, peacocks and other birds, garden scenes, decorative garlands, representations of walls, houses, mountains, and much more. In all, there are more than sixty rooms, many lavishly decorated.

In one chamber, the wall paintings exhibit a series of fountains placed in garden settings. While the others are somewhat conventional, one shows a seated sphinx with a fountain emerging from his head. The conception may appear bizarre to our modern ways of thinking, but, in antiquity, painting and sculpture occupied a position of great importance. There are many literary descriptions of ancient works of art and how they should be understood.<sup>2</sup> Plato (429–347 B.C.) condemned painting that conveyed no understanding of a deeper reality. By the New Testament era, there was a serious effort to indicate genuine emotion and inner sense.<sup>3</sup>

In the charming painting of the Villa Oplontis, we see illustrated the concept of the head of a numinous being as the source of a river, spring, or fountain.<sup>4</sup> Although sphinxes were sometimes depicted as the source of flowing water, artistic representations

in the ancient world more commonly show the source of a river or stream as issuing from the head of Achelous, considered the father of wells and springs.<sup>5</sup> A magnificent bas relief of this deity's head was placed at the beginning of a stream at Megara on the Isthmus of Corinth.<sup>6</sup> The other gods sit about in full figure, but of the river god only the head is shown, for the river itself is his body. As we shall see, some of the ancients were careful to define the function of head in relationship to the rest of the water.

There are many ways that we can gain a knowledge of conceptions entertained by the ancients. This is particularly important when we approach a subject as emotionally charged as the way we should understand the term “head”—both within and outside of the writings of the New Testament. We can inform ourselves by viewing vase and wall paintings, statuary, mosaics, coins, classical texts, the writings of the church fathers, inscriptions—even ancient lexicons. Thus it is that we may compare what we see with what we read in the ancient written sources. We deal with ancient conceptions in both art and language.

In 1863, Bishop Lightfoot wrote:

You are not to suppose that a word [some New Testament word which had its only classical authority in Herodotus] had fallen out of use in the interval, only that it had not been used in the books which remain to us: probably it had been part of the common speech all along. I will go further and say that, if we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for the understanding of the language of the New Testament generally.<sup>7</sup>

This was written before the remarkable finds of Greek papyri in the dry sands of Egypt. Each year, thousands more documents are recovered: personal letters, business communications, legal briefs, bills of sale, marriage contracts, and so forth. Using these, as well as the previously known sources, it is now possible to develop broader lexical values for many terms that were previously known only in the writings of the Greek New Testament.<sup>8</sup> In the case of “head,” we have strong indications of the definition as it was understood by the ancients.

Homer called the innermost part of a stream its “head,” while Eusthatus explained that the river's head is that which generates the whole river.<sup>9</sup> Herodotus tells of a river that rose from thirty-eight separate sources or “heads.”<sup>10</sup> Philoponus, in the sixth century A.D., noted that a river, when it rushed upon a rock, might divide and become two streams, even though it had but a single source (*kephalē*),<sup>11</sup> and the medical writer Galen observed that a river arising from a single spring might be larger at the “head” (*kephalē*) than farther down along its banks.<sup>12</sup> The *Digest of Justinian* declared authoritatively, “The head is the place whence the water issues forth.”<sup>13</sup>

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## Head as Source of Generation

Not only with respect to flowing water was the head considered the place of beginning. Aristotle himself declared that the head was the source or beginning of life, with human sperm being created in the head, traveling down the spinal cord, flowing into the genitals, and so procreating the human race.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the ancient writers sometimes referred to sexual intercourse as “diminishing one’s head.”<sup>15</sup> Artemidorus of Ephesus maintained that the head was like one’s father because, just as the head was the source of light and life for the whole body, so a father was the source of life for his son.<sup>16</sup> “The head [*kephalē*] is like one’s parents because it is the source or cause of one’s having life.”<sup>17</sup> Shortly after the New Testament period, Plutarch told of those who thought the brain “to be the source of generation.”<sup>18</sup> Philo, a Jewish contemporary of Jesus and Paul, wrote, “As though he were the head of a living being, Esau is the progenitor of all those members who have been mentioned.”<sup>19</sup>

Among other values, the head as the source of paternity was understood by the early Christian fathers. Irenaeus equates “head” with “source” when he writes of the “head and source of his own being.”<sup>20</sup> Hippolytus emphasized the productivity of this bodily member when he designated the head as the characteristic substance from which all people were made.<sup>21</sup> He noted, “In the head is said to be the brain, formulating the being from which all fatherhood is produced.”<sup>22</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes (sixth century A.D.) called Adam the “head” of all people in this world because he was their source and father.<sup>23</sup>

Photius, a ninth century Byzantine scholar, was renowned for his vast knowledge of classical authors and his preservation of numerous quotations from works that are now lost to us. He drew upon earlier scholars passionately committed to preserving classical Greek and promoting a continued knowledge of its words and forms. These works Photius edited and incorporated into a formidable lexicon intended as a reference book to aid later writers in understanding the vocabulary of classical and sacred authors. He quite specifically stated that “head” (*kephalē*) was considered to be a synonym for procreator or progenitor.<sup>24</sup>

## Seeking a Definition

But how are we to understand “head” (*kephalē*) as it is found in koine Greek, the language of the New Testament? A term must be defined not by the assigned value in a lexicon but by its actual usage in various contexts. Definitions in particular may be identified by working with a larger pool of occurrences than can be found in the New Testament.

We may substantiate a meaning for a word when it is used interchangeably with another term in the same context. This may happen when the same line of verse is quoted, sometimes using a certain word and sometimes replacing it with an alternate having the same meaning. Ancient writers, like modern ones, loved to demon-

strate their erudition and to embellish their works with the efforts of former poets. Even if the original work is lost, the quotations remain, scattered in extant pieces of literature. Such a scrap of poetry, known only as it is cited by later writers, is called a fragment.



*Ancient Orphic burials sometimes contained figurines of the soul reemerging into the world after remaining nine years beneath the bosom of Persephone, queen of the dead. From the head of the goddess sprout up new little heads, some surrounded by leaf buds as they grow to full reincarnation status. The theme of head as starting point for growth is unmistakable.*

In the case under discussion, a line of Orphic poetry has been found in the works of seven later writers, running all the way from the sixth century B.C. to about A.D. 1,000. Here we discover the word *kephalē* (head) being used interchangeably with *archē* (beginning, source or point of origin). The fragment speaks of Zeus as the beginning, middle, and end of all things. The interchange of two terms recurring in the same quata-

tion is important because it demonstrates that in the seven writers’ minds they have the same semantic value and may be freely exchanged. It is the more valuable because the usages extend over so long a period of time.

For example, the oldest, an Orphic fragment probably from the sixth century B.C., declares:

Zeus was born first, Zeus last, god of the bright bolt:  
Zeus is the head [*kephalē*], Zeus the middle, from Zeus are  
all things made.<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes, however, the last line runs, “Zeus the beginning [*archē*], Zeus the middle, and Zeus the end.”

Four times Zeus is called head, *kephalē*,<sup>26</sup> and three times *archē*, source or beginning.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the two terms appear synonymous in this context, as has been noted by various classical scholars.<sup>28</sup>

## Head as Producing Growth

Other artistic representations sometimes depict the head as productive of growing life. The myth of Athena springing from the head of Zeus is known in story form, mosaics, frescoes, and vase paintings. Ancient Orphic burials sometimes contained figurines of the soul reemerging into the world after remaining nine years beneath the bosom of Persephone, queen of the dead. From the head of the goddess sprout up new little heads, some surrounded by leaf buds as they grow to full reincarnation status. The theme of head as starting point for growth is unmistakable.

Thus, St. Augustine declared love to be the head that produced all the other Christian virtues. From its fertile soil sprang the rest of the spiritual graces. In commenting on Galatians 5:22–23, he wrote:

The Apostle Paul, when he wishes to commend the fruit of the spirit against the works of the flesh, put this at the head: “The fruit of the spirit is love,” he said; and then the rest, as springing up from this head, are twined together. These are joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, perseverance, self control and chastity.<sup>29</sup>

Exactly this concept of growth is what we find explicated by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15–16, his two sole passages dealing with the function of the head in relation to

the body. In both of these passages, he maintains that the head not only causes growth but also causes the body to build itself up. A more expanded paraphrase might read as follows:

From the head, the entire body *grows* with the *growth* of God as it is supplied by the head and held together by every ligament and sinew. (Col. 2:19)

Paul gives very nearly the same concept when he turns to the relationship of head and body in Ephesians chapter 4, certainly a passage to take very seriously when we are considering Ephesians chapter 5. The Apostle wrote:

Let us grow up in all things unto Him who is Christ, the Head. He causes the body to *build itself up* in love as the head *provides empowerment* according to the proportion appropriate for each member as they are bound and supported by every sinew. (Eph. 4:15–16, the author's translation)

Frequently, we assume that the Bible uses "head" to imply "boss" or "chief," and so we miss the assurance of this passage. Here the focus is on the function of the head in producing growth. Every part of the body is connected to the head, and, if the connecting nerve is severed, even a perfectly healthy member will wither. But every part is also interconnected to every other part, and each has a different function that causes it to depend on every other member.

We cannot do better than to emphasize the interdependence and relationship noted by Paul between head and body. How illuminating to conceive of the husband as empowering the wife to build herself up in love so that she may grow into the person that God meant her to be.

## Relationship of Head and Body

Medical writers considered the head as the crucial element in treating the entire body. Aetius Amidenus Medicus insisted that a physician must always begin with the head, because it was the root and source of the entire bodily condition.<sup>30</sup> If the head was indisposed, then the whole body was affected.<sup>31</sup> Aretaeus wrote, "From the head is the source of life, because the head is the place of perception and the starting point of the nerves."<sup>32</sup> Philo announced that the limbs of the body draw life from the forces in the head.<sup>33</sup>

The commonly held anatomical view of antiquity, that the head was the source of the body's existence, led the foremost exegete of the early church to further metaphorical uses. From the head, John Chrysostom said, the senses "have their source and fount"<sup>34</sup>:

In the head are the eyes both of the body, and of the soul. . . . All the senses have thence their origin and source. Thence are sent forth the organs of speech, the power of seeing and of smelling, and all touch. For thence is derived the root of the nerves and bones.<sup>35</sup>

The spirit or vital principle, he explained, "descends from the brain, and communicates the sensitive faculty which is conveyed through the nerves."<sup>36</sup> The head is not only the source (*archē*) of the body but also the stabilizing factor (*bebaiothe*).<sup>37</sup> How often today we fail to recognize the implications of a sensitive dynamic of head and body!

## Theological Considerations

The definition of *kephalē* is of contemporary importance, not only because of the debate over the proper role of husband and wife in Christian marriage, but also because 1 Corinthians 11:3 speaks of God as head of Christ. The church fathers were careful to offer definitions.

Athanasius stated, "For the head (which is the source) of all things is the Son, but God is the head (which is the source) of Christ."<sup>38</sup> Cyril, Archbishop of Alexandria, wrote of Adam:

Therefore of our race he became first *head, which is source*, and was of the earth and earthy. Since Christ was named the second Adam, He has been placed as *head, which is source*, of those who through Him have been formed anew unto Him unto immortality through sanctification in the

Spirit. Therefore He Himself our source, which is head, has appeared as a human being. Yet He, though God by nature, has Himself a generating head, the heavenly Father, and He Himself, though God according to His nature, yet being the Word, was begotten of Him. *Because head means source*, He establishes the truth for those who are wavering in their mind that man is the head of woman, for she was taken out of him. Therefore as God according to His nature, the one Christ and Son and Lord has as His head the heavenly Father, having Himself become our head because He is of the same stock according to the flesh.<sup>39</sup>

Chrysostom's twenty-sixth homily on 1 Corinthians 11:2 demonstrates concerns for both theology and praxis. The text reads, "But the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." He realized that this text might be exploited by heretics wishing to subordinate the Son. He uses here the technical term *elattōn*, employed in christological controversies for the diminishing of the Son.

The first section of the homily is in fact a refutation of subordinationist arguments. He observes that the heretics propel themselves into a dire situation by their misunderstanding of the text. They misconstrue what the apostle intended by his use of the term *kephalē*. For this reason, he engages in a semantic discussion with profound theological implications. A major part of his argument revolves around the definition of *kephalē*.

Chrysostom understands well that in 1 Corinthians 11:3 "head" is employed as a metaphor and as such cannot be comprehended in precisely the same sense in each of its occurrences within the text:



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*To declare the Father as "boss, chief, or authority over" is to deny the status of the eternally begotten Son, equal to Father and Holy Spirit in goodness, power, and love.*

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Therefore, if we choose to take the term “head” in the like sense in all the clauses, the Son will be as far removed from the Father as we are from Him. Nay and the woman will be as far removed from us as we are from the Word of God.

The meaning in the individual case must be determined by the occasion (*to aitton*). No wooden assignment of definition for him. He fully recognized that there was a broad semantic range of meaning.

The term “head” must have different connotations according to the circumstances. Though the Son came in obedience, He came not as a slave but “as free, yielding obedience and giving counsel. For the counselor is not a slave.” Rather, Chrysostom notes that “the Son hath the same honor with Him that begat Him.”

Believers must understand that the name “Son” means “that He is of the same essence and that He is of God.” Certain earthly aspects of father-son relationships should not be applied, just as the metaphor “light” does not apply to all circumstances of natural light. Daylight, for instance, can be superseded by darkness, but God’s illumination is eternal. Thus, metaphors must be used with care.

How, then, should *kephalē* be understood as informing the relationship between Father and Son? In what way could the imagery be comprehended, which associations should be accepted, and which rejected? As applied to the Trinity, Chrysostom said, *kephalē* must imply “perfect oneness and primal cause and source.”<sup>40</sup>

It is always a challenge to understand an ancient text and to apply it appropriately to contemporary situations. The better we can acquaint ourselves with various aspects of the world of the New Testament, the better we shall understand its message for today.

In the case of our understanding of “head,” an enormous emotional and spiritual significance is attached, as the Bible declares God to be the head of Christ and man to be the head of woman. To declare the Father as “boss, chief, or authority over” is to deny the status of the eternally begotten Son, equal to Father and Holy Spirit in goodness, power, and love. To declare the husband as “boss, chief, or authority over” the wife is to cause an imbalance that may threaten the very fabric of the marriage. Indeed, Jesus implied that inferiority of one partner in a relationship hindered intimacy (John 15:15).

As the Apostle Paul said, woman was taken from man, and now man is born of woman—and all things are of God. Neither is the man without the woman nor the woman without the man, in the Lord (1 Cor. 11:11–12).

## Endnotes

1. Some of this material was first presented as a plenary address at the Evangelical Theological Society and was later published as an appendix in Gretchen Gaebelein Hull’s *Equal to Serve: Women and Men Working Together Revealing the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998), 267–83.
2. E.g., Philostratus, Pliny, Quintillian, Plutarch, Achilles Tattius, Dio Chrysostom, etc.
3. Pliny wrote of the artist Aristides of Thebes that he “was the first of all to paint the mind and to give expression to the feelings of men”

(*Natural History* 35:98) as translated in Eva C. Keuls, *Plato and Greek Painting* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 1978), 100.

4. For literary allusions, see Tibullus, *Carmina* 1.7.23ff; Virgil, *Georgics* 4.319, 355.
5. Homer, *Iliad* 21.194–97. *Odyssey* 9.140, 13.102, 346. Eustathius, *On Iliad*, as quoted in R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951) 117, footnote 9.
6. “Die ‘tête de taureau’ über dem orifice einer fontaine an einem rocher als die Acheloosmaske zu fassen ist.” (“The bull’s head over the opening of a fountain at the edge of a rock is to be understood as a mask [of the god] Achelous”) Friedrich Wieseler, “Ueber ein Votivrelief aus Megara,” *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse* (Abhandlungen: Zwanzigster Band, 1875), 11–39.
7. George Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri* (Chicago, Ill.: Ares Publishing Company, 1980), xx.
8. One applying the broader lexical values to the New Testament is Ann Nyland, an Australian classicist. Her translation of the New Testament offers many new insights into ways the original language was used.
9. Homer, *Odyssey* 9.140, 13.102, 346. Eustathius, *On Iliad*, loc. cit.
10. Herodotus, *Histories* 4.91 and *Anthologia Graeca* 9.703.2.
11. Philoponus, *De Generatione Animalium* 14.3.1.
12. Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 6.3.21.4, ed. and trans. Phillip De Lacy, 3 vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1978–84), 2:378.
13. *Digesta (Libri Pandectarum)* 43.20.
14. Aristotle, *Problemata*, 10.57.
15. Plautus, fr. 112, *Mercator*, 100ff, 533ff (ed. W. M. Lindsay). Statius Caecilius 140. Livius Andronicus 28. Sextus Turpilius 112. *Dramatic Fragments* (ed. J. C. O. Ribbeck).
16. Artemidorus Daldianus, ed. Roger Pack, *Artemidori Daldiani Onirocriticon Libri V* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1963), 1.2.7.
17. Artemidorus Daldianus, 1.35.43.
18. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 2.65; Plutarch, *Symposium* 2.3.
19. *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies*, 61. I am indebted to Philip Payne for calling this text to my attention.
20. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.3, in *Patrologia Graeca* [hereafter, PG], ed. J.-P. Migne, 162 vols. (Paris, 1857–1886), 7:496.
21. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.2.8 (PG 16.3.3138).
22. Hippolytus (PG 16.3.3138).
23. Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana* 5.209 (PG 88.224).
24. Photius, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 11:3, in K. Staab, *Paulus-kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche aus Katenenhandschriften gesammelt und herausgegeben* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1933) 567.1.
25. Otto Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1963), no. 21a, line 2, no. 168, 201. Translation of M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 89.
26. Proclus, *Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* 2.95.48. (5.322). Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the World* 7. This treatise was attributed to Aristotle in antiquity. It appears actually to be a late Stoic work, but to be based upon an earlier Stoic source (Otto Kern 1922, fragment 21a). Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.9. *Derveni Papyrus* col. 13, line 12; text in S. G. Kapsomenos 1964b:21. Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 1.23.
27. Proclus, *Theology* 6.8.363. Plutarch, *De Communibus Notitiis Contra Stoicas* 31.385, *De Defectu Oraculorum* 48.379.T.9. Anonymous in *Vita Arati* 273. Achilles Tattius, fragment 81.29, ed. E. Maass, *Commen-*

tariorum in Aratum Reliquiae, 1898; Otto Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, vol. 2, (Berlin, 1963); *Fragmenta Veteriora* no. 21, 91; *Adnotat Scholiasta* 451, ed. Bekker; Scholion on Plato *Laws* 4.715E.

28. "Sie verstanden also das Wort *kephalē* hier also Anfang, ja setzten, beeinflusst von der Aion-Theologie, das Wort *archē* dafür ein. . . . Plato . . . sagt (*Leg.* IV 715 e) dafür *archen te kai teleuten kai mesa*. Wer sich für die Schreibung der Verse auf ihn beruft, müsste folgerichtig auch *arche* für *kephalē* schreiben" ("Therefore, they understand the word *kephalē* as 'beginning' and indeed substitute it for the word *archē*. . . . Plato . . . instead says, 'beginning [*archē*] and end and middle' [*Laws* 4.715E]. Therefore, logically, one must write *archē* for *kephalē* for the version of the phrase quoted by him.") Richard Reitzenstein and Hans Heinrich Schaefer, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965), 80–81.

29. Translated from the Latin text in Ralph McInerny, *Let's Read Latin: Introduction to the Language of the Church* (South Bend, Ind.: Dumb Ox Books, 1995), 99.

30. Aetius Amidenus Medicus, *Liber Medicinales* 6.28.69, ed. A. Oliv-

ieri (Berlin: Akademi-Verlag, 1950), 174–75

31. Aetius Amidenus Medicus, 8.35.9, 448.

32. Aretaeus Medicus, *De curatione acutorum morborum libri duo*, ed. K. Hude (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 1.1.5.8.

33. Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments* 125.

34. John Chrysostom, *On 1 and 2 Thessalonians* 163 (PG 62.499.34 to 62.500.34).

35. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians* 5:5, 513.

36. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 4:16. *Homily 11*.

37. John Chrysostom, *Homily 3 on Ephesians*, 62. (PG 159.62.26.22–53).

38. Athanasius, *De Synodis anathema* 26 (PG 26., 740, B).

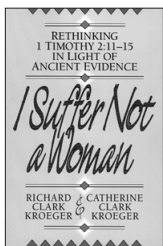
39. Cyril of Alexandria, *De Recta Fide ad Pulcheriam et Eudociam* 2.3, ed. P.E. Pusey, 268, emphasis added.

40. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *Homily 26* (PG 61.214, 216).

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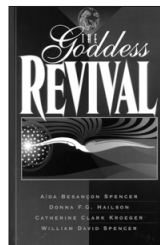
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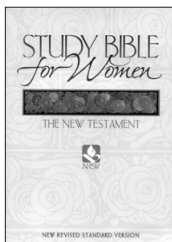


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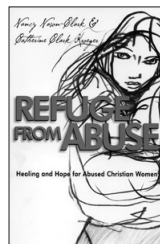
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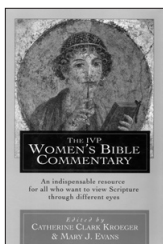


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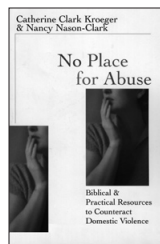
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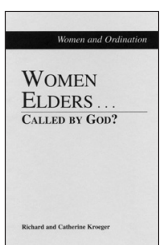


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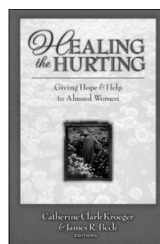
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