

# A Lexical and Exegetical Examination of οἰκονομία

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## Introduction

As a graduate of three dispensational schools,<sup>1</sup> I was exposed to dispensational hermeneutics “at an early age” in my faith and came to embrace the “*sine qua non*” of Dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup> This loving embrace of the basic elements of Dispensationalism has remained for over 25 years. However I must confess that as a New Testament major at all three of these institutions, I sometimes felt that little exegesis was going on in the theology classes that I was taking. I understand the limitations in a theology class. There simply is not enough time to do in-depth exegesis on every single passage that is used to support various theological propositions.<sup>3</sup>

One attempt at exegesis that I vividly remember in both Bible College and seminary was the use of οἰκονομία in the New Testament to defend Dispensationalism.<sup>4</sup> In other words, “Dispensationalism is true because the Bible uses the term.” I do not know that it was ever stated like that but the implication was clearly there. I know, because I myself have used the argument and I am not an original thinker. My exposure to lexical studies over the past several years has caused me to set out to discern if we dispensationalists have always been correct in how we appeal to the term οἰκονομία in the defense of Dispensationalism.

## Importance of Definitions with Regard to Dispensationalism

Charles Ryrie, in his 1965 book *Dispensationalism Today*, spoke of the importance of clear, coherent definitions in regard to Dispensationalism. Ryrie’s first words in the chapter titled, “What is a dispensation?” were, “There is no more primary problem in the whole matter of Dispensationalism than that of definition. By this is meant not simply arriving at a single

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<sup>1</sup> Moody Bible Institute, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Baptist Bible Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 43-47, where he describes the three key aspects of Dispensationalism as (1) a distinction between Israel and the church, (2) a literal/normal/plain hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures, and (3) the doxological purpose of God in the world.

<sup>3</sup> In my perfect world, you would not be allowed to take theology unless you have taken languages. I know, this is too impractical given the format of the traditional seminary perspective. One does wonder, given how education is going online, if perhaps a tweak might be in order: Language would be studied first including exegetical methodology followed by courses in biblical/systematic theology.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Paul’s three uses in Ephesians (1:10; 3:2, 9).

sentence definition of the word, but rather a complete definition and description of the concept.”<sup>5</sup>

One difficulty in this discussion is identifying whether the English term “dispensation” or the Greek term οἰκονομία is meant when the term “dispensation” is being addressed by dispensationalists. This challenge has led to what might be called an amalgamation between the English term “dispensation” and the Greek term οἰκονομία. In other words, what may be going on at times is that dispensationalists are addressing hermeneutical issues and correctly seeing the progress of revelation. In this progress of revelation, it is clear that God has dealt differently with man in different times. Dispensationalists see these times as “dispensations” and then load up the term οἰκονομία with temporal significance beyond what is inherent in the term.

Therefore the key question that must be addressed is this: Does the Bible use the term οἰκονομία in the way that some dispensationalists use the term “dispensation?” In order to answer this question, we must first look at how various dispensationalists have defined a dispensation.

### Definitions of the term “Dispensation” by various dispensationalists

What follows is not an exhaustive examination of how various dispensationalists have defined the term dispensation. It simply is a survey of how key dispensationalists have defined the term.

#### *C. I. Scofield*

C. I. Scofield in many ways has been and still is the straw man used by critics of Dispensationalism. This criticism is directed at many levels including his definition of a dispensation. He defined a dispensation as follows:

A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture.<sup>6</sup>

Scofield sees in the English term the obvious element of time. As we will see, subsequent dispensationalists have attempted to tweak this definition a bit, mostly for clarification. What has been needed is a thorough lexical examination of the term.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 22. This book was subsequently revised in 1995 with the new title, *Dispensationalism*. I have cited the earlier edition for historical purposes, namely, to demonstrate that the call for precision in definitions was recognized some 45 years ago. There are two notes of interest. First, in the revision *Dispensationalism*, this quote cited above has been changed by Ryrie just a bit. In the last sentence of the quote, the phrase “but rather a complete definition and description of the concept,” has been changed to read, “but also formulating a definition/description of the concept” (*op cit. Dispensationalism* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 23). This was done apparently to clear up the possible confusion that in the first edition Ryrie was calling for both a definition and a description. Second, the revised edition, *Dispensationalism* states in the copyright that the original work was published in 1966. This writer possesses a copy of *Dispensationalism Today* with a copyright of 1965.

<sup>6</sup> The Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 5

## Lewis Sperry Chafer

In his book titled *Dispensationalism*, Chafer addresses the meaning of a dispensation. He notes that “the word *dispensation* is Latin in its origin, being derived from *dispensatio*—economical management or superintendence—and has its equivalent in the Greek *oikonomia*, meaning, in this usage, ‘stewardship’ or ‘economy’ as to special features of divine government in the various ages.”<sup>7</sup> Chafer makes it clear in this work that οἰκονομία means “stewardship or economy” as it relates to time or “various ages.” His argument that the English term dispensation “has its equivalent in the Greek *oikonomia*” is obviously assumed and not demonstrated. Chafer then finds affinity with Scofield’s definition of a dispensation. He states that “the definition advanced by the late Dr. C. I. Scofield...is hardly entitled to the criticism which is aimed against it.”<sup>8</sup> Such a defense of Scofield’s definition can only be justified by a lexical and exegetical examination of οἰκονομία.

Chafer, later in his *Systematic Theology*, defines a dispensation in reference to οἰκονομία without any reference to time. He writes, “Translated from the word οἰκονομία, meaning primarily *stewardship*, a dispensation is a specific, divine economy, a commitment from God to man of a responsibility to discharge that which God has appointed him.”<sup>9</sup> As the lexical evidence below will clearly demonstrate, this is a theological definition and not a lexical one.

## Charles Ryrie

In his writings, Charles Ryrie has been careful to avoid loading the term “dispensation” with any time element. In the 1957 article titled “The Necessity of Dispensationalism,” Ryrie notes that criticisms against Scofield are valid. After citing Scofield’s definition of a dispensation he writes,

The usual criticism leveled against this definition is that it is not true to the meaning of *oikonomia* since it says nothing about a stewardship and emphasizes the period of time aspect. The criticism may be somewhat valid, for a dispensation is primarily a stewardship, administration, or arrangement and not a period of time. Age and dispensation are not synonymous in meaning even though they may exactly coincide in history. A dispensation is basically the arrangement involved, not the time involved; therefore a proper definition must emphasize this.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Dallas Seminary Press: Dallas, 1936), 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948), 7:122.

<sup>10</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, “The Necessity of Dispensationalism,” *BibSac* 114 (July, 1957): 250. Ryrie wrote this article eight years prior to *Dispensationalism Today*, and it was incorporated, with some revision, into chapter 1 of the book. In the article Ryrie makes the same point for the need for precise definitions (250-54) that he makes in the book (*Dispensationalism Today*, 22).

Eight years later, in his original work *Dispensationalism Today*, Ryrie addresses the meaning of a dispensation in a number of ways. He cites the Oxford English Dictionary definition to make the point that “in defining the use of the term theologically” the English term “dispensation” is “a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time... also, the age or period during which a system has prevailed.”<sup>11</sup> That the English term “dispensation” has a time component is obvious in everyday English use. This is not exactly the issue, however, that we are discussing. Ryrie is addressing the English term “dispensation,” and by extension, the theological definition of a dispensation.

In the same work he notes that a definition of a “dispensation” in relation to Dispensationalism is free of this time element. He writes, “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”<sup>12</sup> Later on he describes Dispensationalism as follows: “Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and at various stages of revelation in the process of time.”<sup>13</sup> Ryrie is careful in formal designations to avoid the time component of a dispensation. In other words, when he defines a dispensation in terms of οἰκονομία, he clearly mentions there is no time component in the term. However when he speaks theologically regarding the concept of a dispensation within Dispensationalism, he acknowledges that dispensations contain a time component. I think most dispensationalists would agree with this distinction.

Ryrie’s criticism of Scofield’s definition of a dispensation appears again in *Dispensationalism Today* with little change from the 1957 article. He notes,

However, there is a certain justification to the criticism, for a dispensation is primarily a stewardship arrangement and not a period of time (though obviously the arrangement will exist during a period of time). Age and dispensation are not synonymous in meaning, even though they may exactly coincide in the historical outworking. A dispensation is basically the arrangement involved, not the time involved: and a proper definition will take this into account. However, there is no reason for great alarm if a definition does ascribe time to a dispensation!<sup>14</sup>

I am not sure that the last sentence in this quote is helpful. There may be a case for at least “some alarm” if dispensationalists insist on “a definition” that “does ascribe time to a dispensation!” I understand what Ryrie is saying here, but I am not sure it is appreciated by the critics of Dispensationalism. If I may play devil’s advocate, I can hear these critics crying out, “Ryrie says that precision in definitions is important, but then seems indifferent if definitions of a dispensation in light of οἰκονομία contain an element of time, even though he argues that they should not!”

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<sup>11</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 29. This is the same exact definition that he used 8 years earlier in the article “The Necessity of Dispensationalism,” (251).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 29.

I agree with Ryrie. Precision is important in definitions, and if those who use οἰκονομία to defend Dispensationalism insist on arguing for a time component for the Greek term, the onus is on them to validate the claim.

*John Walvoord*

John Walvoord, in an article titled “Dispensational Premillennialism” defined a dispensation in light of οἰκονομία, writing,

As used in Scripture, the word *dispensation* is a translation of the noun *oikonomia* and is found in the following passages: Luke 16:2-4; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25; and 1 Timothy 1:4. It is variously translated *dispensation* or *stewardship*....In its biblical usage, the concept is not explicitly a time period and for this reason the Scofield definition has been questioned.<sup>15</sup>

Walvoord then attempts to defend Scofield’s definition, stressing that “objections to the definition of a dispensation as a time period are based on partial truth.” His defense of Scofield is based on appealing to English dictionaries as well as stressing that “though its biblical use embodies principally the idea of stewardship, theologians for generations have been using the word *dispensation* as a time period.”<sup>16</sup> I am not comfortable arguing that English dictionaries and historical theology are the best way to validate the lexical significance of a Greek term, especially when that Greek term is the basis for a theological definition.

*Stanley Toussaint*

Stanley Toussaint, in an article titled “A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism,” cites the definition of a “dispensation” from the Scofield Reference Bible while acknowledging the objections which surround Scofield’s defining of the term with a time component.<sup>17</sup> Toussaint, after citing both Scofield and Chafer, adopts the definition of Ryrie, namely, that “a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purposes.”<sup>18</sup> He augments this definition when he notes, “However, a time element is always involved,”<sup>19</sup> and then appeals to οἰκονομία to validate the definition.<sup>20</sup> This is similar to how other dispensationalists argue in defining a dispensation.

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<sup>15</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Dispensational Premillennialism,” in *The New Life: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. by Millard J. Erickson, 519-24 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 520. [This article originally appeared in *Christianity Today*, 2 September 15, 1958].

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, 81-91, ed. by Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 82.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 83.

Elliott Johnson

Elliott Johnson holds that “the exegetical basis for dispensationalism is derived partially from a study of Paul’s three references to the term *oikonomia* within the book of Ephesians.”<sup>21</sup> Johnson does not offer a single definition of a dispensation, instead offering specific explanations or descriptions of a “dispensation” in each of Paul’s three uses of *οἰκονομία* in Ephesians. He sees the use of *οἰκονομία* in Ephesians 1:10 denoting a “future stewardship in the coming age in which all creation is restored to the rule of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> He sees the use of *οἰκονομία* in Ephesians 3:2 and 9 as “referring to his own ministry to the Gentiles,” specifically, “the administration of God’s grace for the Gentiles accomplished in Christ that characterized Paul’s ministry.”<sup>23</sup>

John MacArthur

John MacArthur is one of the more public faces of Dispensationalism among pastors. He defines both Dispensationalism and a dispensation as follows.

*Dispensationalism is a system of biblical interpretation that sees a distinction between God’s program for Israel and His dealings with the church. It’s really as simple as that.*

*A dispensation is the plan of God by which He administers His rule within a given era in His eternal program. Dispensations are not periods of time, but different administrations in the eternal outworking of God’s purpose. It is especially crucial to note that the way of salvation—by grace through faith—is the same in every dispensation. God’s redemptive plan remains unchanged, but the way He administers it will vary from one dispensation to another. Dispensationalists note that Israel was the focus of God’s redemptive plan in one dispensation. The church, consisting of redeemed people including Jews and Gentiles, is the focus in another. All dispensationalists believe at least one dispensation is still future—during the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, known as the millennium, in which Israel will once again play a pivotal role.*

*Dispensationalism teaches that all God’s remaining covenant promises to Israel will be literally fulfilled—including the promises of earthly blessings and an earthly messianic kingdom. God promised Israel, for example, that they would possess the promised land forever (Gen. 13:14-17; Exod. 32:13). Scripture declares that Messiah will rule over the kingdoms of the earth from Jerusalem (Zech. 14:9-11). Old Testament prophecy says that all Israel will one day be restored to the promised land (Amos 9:14-15, the temple will be rebuilt (Ezek. 37:26-28); and the people of Israel will be redeemed (Jer. 23:6; Rom. 11:26-27). Dispensationalists believe all those promised blessings will come to pass as literally as did the promised curses.*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, “Hermeneutics and Dispensationalism,” 239-55, in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, 240.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 203-04. [Italics his]

While in this particular context MacArthur does not comment on the term οἰκονομία, he is very clear about the lack of a time element in a dispensation.

Most dispensationalists today do seem to understand that a dispensation is a stewardship or administration and that οἰκονομία does not inherently possess the lexical force of time. However the impact of early dispensationalists and the linking of a time component to οἰκονομία is still a problem in some corners of Dispensationalism. The following is only a snapshot of this reality, but it is this kind of scholarship which is criticized by many non-dispensationalists.

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## "Insights" From the New Testament Greek

### THE BIBLE TERM "DISPENSATIONS": The Greek word "οικονομία"

1. The Bible term "dispensations" describes the distinct "divisions of time" God designed into His plan for mankind.
2. The English word "dispensations" is in Eph 1:10 and 3:1&2, where it describes the Age we presently live in, the "Church Age", as the Age of "Grace" (unmerited favor), and the Age of the "fullness of times", (getting everything together).
3. The Greek word translated "dispensations" is "οικονομία", meaning "to manage a household". "Οικονομία" likely comes from a combination of two Greek words, "οικος", meaning "household", and "μενος" meaning "to manage".<sup>25</sup>

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In the first point, the linking of time with the biblical term οἰκονομία is assumed. It is described as "the Bible term 'dispensations.'" In the second point, because the English term "dispensation" is found in the text of Ephesians, it is assumed that the English definition that includes time must be present in the underlying Greek term οἰκονομία. Then in the third point, when οἰκονομία is finally mentioned, its etymology is incorrectly cited.<sup>26</sup> The compound is actually made up of οἶκος and νέμω and *not* "οικος" and "μενος."<sup>27</sup> My point is not to pick on this fellow, but only to show that these types of defenses of Dispensationalism are out there. I have heard similar arguments in Bible College and in church.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.biblefood.com/disp.html>

<sup>26</sup> For the dangers of "root fallacy," see James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 100-18.

<sup>27</sup> See Frederick W. Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 248, who lists as the etymology for the related noun οἰκονόμος as οἶκος and νέμω. See also Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon: Abridged*, 26th ed., rev. George Ricker Berry, s.v. "οἰκονόμος" (Chicago: Follett Publishing, 1941), 478.

## Conclusion

We have looked at how key dispensationalists have defined or described a “dispensation” within the discipline of Dispensationalism. This has included the role which οἰκονομία plays in reference to Dispensationalism. While early dispensationalists argued that the theologically time-based dispensations were synonymous with the use of οἰκονομία in the Greek New Testament, subsequent dispensationalists have modified that position. This is undoubtedly because of their examination of the lexical data. Next, we will look at the term οἰκονομία both lexically and exegetically.<sup>28</sup>

## Lexical Evidence

### Ancient Greek

There are some 206 uses of οἰκονομία in its various forms between the earliest uses in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. through the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.<sup>29</sup> The following survey of uses takes into account over 130 of these uses or almost two-thirds of the total uses of οἰκονομία through the first century A.D.

#### *Xenophon (5-4 c. B.C.)*

The historian Xenophon uses οἰκονομία ten times and the uses are all contained in four individual passages. The opening chapter of his work, “Oeconomicus” contains a fascinating discussion between Socrates and Critobulus regarding estate management.<sup>30</sup> Xenophon writes,

Ἦκουσα δέ ποτε αὐτου και περι οἰκονομίας τοιάδε διαλεγομένου. Εἰπέ μοι, ἔφη, ὦ Κριτόβουλε, ἄρά γε ἡ οἰκονομία ἐπιστήμης τινὸς ὄνομά ἐστιν, ὡσπερ ἡ ἰατρικὴ καὶ καλκευτικὴ καὶ τεκτονικὴ;

Ἦμοιγε δοκεῖ, ἔφη ὁ Κριτόβουλος.

Ἦ καὶ ὡπερ τούτων τῶν τεχνῶν ἔχοιμεν ἂν εἰπεῖν ὅ τι ἔργον ἐκάστης, οὕτω καὶ τῆς οἰκονομίας δυνάμεθα εἰπεῖν ὅ τι ἔργον αὐτῆς ἐστι;

Δοκεῖ γοῦν, ἔφη ὁ Κριτόβουλος, οἰκονόμου ἀγαθοῦ εἶναι εὖ οἴκειν τὸν ἑαυτοῦ οἶκον.

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<sup>28</sup> It is very clear to this writer that it is impossible to adequately address the lexical and exegetical issues regarding οἰκονομία within the scope of this paper. (Perhaps a Ph.D. dissertation might be in order for some New Testament major with an interest in writing in this area).

<sup>29</sup> According to *Thesaurus of Linguae Graecae*, [hereafter cited as *TLG*]. Of these 206 uses, 179 are listed in *TLG* as occurring prior to the nine uses in the New Testament.

**Note:** At times the locations of the Greek text from *TLG* do not line up exactly with the Loeb Classical Library editions of the ancient Greek works. In those few places, the *TLG* citations are cited.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the term “oeconomicus” is related to οἰκονομία. See below note regarding Aristotle’s similar discussion regarding “Oeconomica.”



Ἦ καὶ τὸν ἄλλου δὲ οἶκον, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, εἰ ἐπιτρέποι τις αὐτῷ, οὐκ ἂν δύναίτο, εἰ Βούλοίτο, εὖ οἰκεῖν, ὥσπερ καὶ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ; ὁ μὲν γὰρ τεκτονικὴν ἐπιστάμενος ὁμοίως ἂν καὶ ἄλλῳ δύναίτο ἐργάζεσθαι ὅτιπερ καὶ ἑαυτῷ, καὶ ὁ οἰκονομικός γ' ἂν ὡσαύτως.

Ἔμοιγε κοκεῖ, ὦ Σώκκρατες.

I once heard him discuss the subject of **estate management** in the following manner.

“Tell me, Critobulus, is **estate management** the name of a branch of knowledge, like medicine, smithing and carpentry?”

“I think so,” replied Critobulus.

“And can we say what the function of **estate management** is, just as we can say what is the function of each of these arts?”

“Well, I suppose that the business of a good estate manager is to manage his own estate well.”

“Yes, and in case he were put in charge of another man’s estate, could he not, if he chose, manage it as well as he manages his own? Anyone who understands carpentry can do for another exactly the same work as he does for himself; and so, I presume, can a good estate manager.”

“I think so, Socrates.”<sup>31</sup>

In this particular passage, Xenophon records three uses of οἰκονομία that are translated into English all three times as “estate management.” One will also notice the use of οἰκονόμου which is from οἰκονόμος, a term rendered here as “estate manager”<sup>32</sup> as well as the adjective οἰκονομικός, a term that has the gloss of “practised in the management of a household or family.”<sup>33</sup>

In the very next chapter of “Oeconomicus,” the discussion of estate management continues between Critobulus and Socrates with two similar uses of οἰκονομία.<sup>34</sup> This is followed up with three more identical uses of οἰκονομία.<sup>35</sup> In all eight uses of οἰκονομία in “Oeconomicus,” the context supports a translation value of “estate management” given what is being discussed contextually. The term is used to simply describe the discipline or task of managing a home or estate.

In his work “Cyropaedia” Xenophon employs οἰκονομία two times, and in very similar ways as noted above. The first use is found in a discussion between a father and son where the father asks whether his son had indeed received instruction regarding “domestic economy.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Xenophon, “Oeconomicus” in *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus* 1.1.1-3. Trans. E. C. Marchant, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1923. There is some debate as to why Xenophon placed these words on the lips of Socrates. For a helpful discussion, see the introduction to this work, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>32</sup> BDAG has the gloss of “steward, manager;” s.v. “οἰκονόμος,” 698.

<sup>33</sup> Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry S. Jones, s.v. “οἰκονομικός” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 1204. [Hereafter cited as LSJ]

<sup>34</sup> Xenophon, “Oeconomicus” in *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus* 2.12.2 and 2.13.1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.4.5; 6.1.5; and 6.4.3.

<sup>36</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 2 vols. Trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1.6.12.6.

The final use is found within a context of fortress provisions. The text reads,

“Ὅσον δὲ χρόνου ἐκαθέζετο ὁ Κῦρος ἀμφιτὴν περὶ το φρούριον **οἰκονομίαν**”

“Now during the time that Cyrus was busy with the **arrangements** about the fortress.”<sup>37</sup>

Once again we see the idea of the management of resources. This idea is the sole concept found in all ten of the uses of Xenophon.

*Plato (5-4 c. B.C.)*

The philosopher Plato uses οἰκονομία eight times and the results are as predictable as those found in Xenophon. The uses simply denote the management of a household or estate.<sup>38</sup>

*Aristotle (4 c. B.C.)*

The great philosopher uses οἰκονομία some 30 times. A sampling of his uses from various works shows similar lexical use as that of earlier classical writers.

An interesting use of οἰκονομία is found in Aristotle’s work, “*Oeconomica*.” The evidence supports that this particular work of Aristotle was dependent upon Xenophon’s title “*Oeconomicus*.”<sup>39</sup> In Book 1 of the work, Aristotle notes the various advantages of different kinds of systems of “housecraft” (οἰκονομική) or the art of governing a household or home.<sup>40</sup> This instruction is given within the discussion of keeping slaves, some of whom are trusted to manage the affairs of the master.<sup>41</sup> Aristotle mentions the Persian and Laconian systems of management and adds that the “Athenian housecraft has, however, some advantages” (ἡ Ἀττικὴ δὲ οἰκονομία χρήσιμος).<sup>42</sup> In addition, while Aristotle makes a distinction between Housecraft (οἰκονομική) and Statecraft (the managing of the state - πολιτικά), he has no problem using οἰκονομία to denote the “administration of the king.”<sup>43</sup> The term is even used of the “administration” (οἰκονομεῖν) of the private citizen.<sup>44</sup> A few lines later he says of the private

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5.3.25.2.

<sup>38</sup> See Plato, *Laws*, 2 vols. Trans. R. G. Bury, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1926, 694.C.7; 747.B.1; 809.C.5; 819.C.5; *Apology*, Trans. Harold North Fowler, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1914, 36.B.7; *Lysis*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1926, 209.D.2; *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1930, 407.B.6; 498.A.1.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *Oeconomica*, trans. G. Cyril Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 323.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1343a, line 1.

<sup>41</sup> See Aristotle’s discussion between 1344a, line 8 and 1344a, line 24.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1344b, line 32. See also line 33. Similar uses of “housecraft” in *Oeconomica* are found in 1345a, line 7; 1345a, line 34. Aristotle has substituted οἰκονομία for οἰκονομική.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1345b, line 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 1346a, line 10. See also 1345a, lines 12 and 17;

citizen that he has the same challenge that all managers have. Aristotle, stating the obvious, writes,

Χωρὶς δὲ τούτων ὁ πάσαις μὲν ἐπικοινωνεῖται ταῖς **οἰκονομίαις**, καὶ προσήκει σκοπεῖν αὐτὸ μὴ παρέργως, μάλιστα δὲ ταύτη, τὸ τἀναλώματα μὴ μείζω τῶν προσόδων γίνεσθαι.

Apart from all these, there is a matter common to all kinds of **administrations** which is best considered at this particular point, and deserves more than cursory attention. This is the importance of keeping expenditure within the limits of revenue.<sup>45</sup>

Aristotle also records advice for the master and his wife as well in terms of how they manage their estate.<sup>46</sup>

The majority of uses of οἰκονομία are in his work *Politics*, where he uses the term 16 times. In this work we see the same uses as previous with the majority being used to denote on a general sense of managing a household. These uses are rendered into English in similar ways including “household management,”<sup>47</sup> “household affairs,”<sup>48</sup> “household art,”<sup>49</sup> “household economy,”<sup>50</sup> and “master of a household.”<sup>51</sup> There are also uses that are rendered “institutions,”<sup>52</sup> and “administrations.”<sup>53</sup> These uses are very similar. One final use illustrates just how general the term is when the roles of men and women are compared. Aristotle notes,

(δόξαι γὰρ ἂν εἶναι δειλὸς ἀνὴρ εἰ οὕτως ἀνδρεῖος εἶη ὥσπερ γυνὴ ἀνδρεία, καὶ γυνὴ λάλος εἰ οὕτω κοσμία εἶη ὥσπερ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἀγαθός. ἐπεὶ καὶ **οἰκονομία** ἑτέρα ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός, τοῦ μὲν γὰρ κτᾶσθαι τῆς δὲ φυλάττειν ἔργον ἐστίν).

(for a man would be thought a coward if he were only as brave as a brave woman, and a woman a chatterer if she were only as modest as a good man; since even the **household functions** of a man and of a woman are different—his business is to get and hers to keep).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 1346a, line 14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1345a, line 7.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1253b, lines 2, 3, 12, 19, 24; 1259b, line 8; 1264b, line 6; 1278b, line 18; 1338a, line 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1335a, line 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1258a, line 29.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1265b, line 25.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1285b, line 33.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1308b, line 32.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1314, line 15.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 1277b, line 24.

Here the management of the household demonstrates two aspects; the acquiring of property and also the preserving of it.

*Polybius (3-2 c. B.C.)*

The 2nd century BC historian Polybius uses οἰκονομία 37 times most of which are military uses. One common military use is found with the task of managing the spoils of war, described as “disposing of the booty.”<sup>55</sup> A similar use is found in the “disposing of prisoners.”<sup>56</sup> There are also uses that denote the dispensing of money for various aspects of war,<sup>57</sup> as well as the role of the “commissariat” who managed the soldier’s resources.<sup>58</sup> There are also several uses found in contexts of the simple management of war and all its intricacies.<sup>59</sup> Polybius also uses οἰκονομία in very general ways for the administrating of various tasks and affairs,<sup>60</sup> including the writing of history.<sup>61</sup> In summary, Polybius uses οἰκονομία in the same way as earlier writers.

*Diodorus Siculus (1 c. B.C.)*

The uses by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus or “Diodorus of Sicily” are important in that from a synchronic point of view, his uses of οἰκονομία are more contemporary to those of the New Testament writers than any of the writers examined to this point.

Diodorus Siculus uses οἰκονομία eleven times in very general ways. Like Polybius, he uses the term to describe the “arrangement of varied material” by historians.<sup>62</sup> There are also uses to denote civil management (i.e. “entire administration of Egypt”),<sup>63</sup> basic “domestic affairs,”<sup>64</sup> “business affairs,”<sup>65</sup> and a “father’s administration.”<sup>66</sup> In one particular passage, Diodorus uses

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<sup>55</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, vol. 1, trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 2.2.9.4; 2.2.11.3; vol. 2, trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 4.86.4.4; vol. 3 trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 5.16.5.3; vol. 4, trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 10.17.6.2; vol. 5, trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 20.9.5.1.

<sup>56</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, vol. 3, 10.40.2.1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, 16.21.4.4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, 3.100.7.1.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, 3.32.101; vol. 3, 5.39.6.3; 5.50.5.2; 6.12.5.2

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 1.13.9.4; vol. 2, 3.32.10.1; vol. 3, 6.26.5.2; 6.31.10.4; vol. 4, 13.5.7.3; vol. 5, 22.2.8.3; vol. 6, trans. W. R. Patton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 32.7.5.3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, 8.2.2.3.

<sup>62</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, vol. III, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 5.1.1.3; 5.1.2.3; 5.1.4.3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., vol. I, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 1.95.1.4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., vol. XII, trans. Francis R. Walton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 36.5.2.7.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 1.81.3.2.

οἰκονομία synonymously with διάταξις<sup>67</sup> in the phrase “general management and administration.”<sup>68</sup> In one somewhat unique use, Diodorus employs οἰκονομία to describe “the classification of literary types” (τῆ γὰρ οἰκονομία τῶν λόγῶν).<sup>69</sup> The use is similar to the idea of “arrangement” that is found in many other classical Greek writers.

Diodorus Siculus writes some 400 years after Xenophon, but we see very similar kinds of uses. The point here is that the term οἰκονομία has maintained the same basic semantic range over 400 years.

*Dionysius Halicarnassensis (1 c. B.C.)*

The 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. historian and teacher of rhetoric, Dionysius Halicarnassensis uses οἰκονομία 22 times and like Diodorus Siculus, his uses are relatively close in time to those used by the New Testament writers.

In his work *The Roman Antiquities*, Dionysius uses οἰκονομία as other before him have done, in describing the management of state affairs. The expression “civil administration” (παῖς πολιτικαῖς οἰκονομιαῖς)<sup>70</sup> is similar to uses by other writers.<sup>71</sup>

In his work *Demosthenes*, Dionysius discusses how Demosthenes had observed the way in which other great writers had arranged their ideas and how he strove to do the same in his own works. Dionysius discusses of Demosthenes,

ἀλλ’ ὡσπερ τῆς ἐν τοῖς νοήμασιν οἰκονομίας πολλὴν ἐποιεῖτο δόσιν, οὕτω καὶ τῆς ἐν τοῖς ὀνόμασιν ἁρμονίας,

but just as he laid great stress upon the **arrangement** of his ideas, so he showed the same concern for the melodious order of words.<sup>72</sup>

Several lines later, he employs the term again when he describes how Demosthenes, in observing the likes of Isocrates and Plato, also noted that good oratory is based on two factors, subject matter and style of delivery. Subject matter he observed was based on two sub factors,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., vol. VIII, trans. C. Bradford Welles (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 17.2.2.6.

<sup>67</sup> See LSJ, s.v. “διάταξις,” where the glosses listed are “disposition, arrangement,” (414).

<sup>68</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, vol. XI, trans. Francis R. Walton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 31.16.3.18.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., vol. X, trans. Russel M. Geer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 20.1.2.4.

<sup>70</sup> Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *The Roman Antiquities*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 11.19.5.3; see also πολιτικὰς οἰκονομιαῖς in 20.8.2.2.

<sup>71</sup> See Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, vol. 1, 1.95.1.4; see also Aristotle, *Oeconomica*, 1345b, line 11.

<sup>72</sup> Dionysius Halicarnassensis, “On the Style of Demosthenes,” in *The Critical Essays*, trans. Stephen Usher, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 51.15.

preparation or invention, and “deployment of the prepared material, which they call **arrangement**” (καὶ εἰς τὴν χρῆσιν τῶν παρεσκευασμένων, ἣν προσαγορεύουσιν **οἰκονομίαν**).<sup>73</sup> The term οἰκονομία is used here to describe how ideas are managed in the process of good oratory.

In his work *Thucydides*, Dionysius employs οἰκονομία to describe how historians arrange material in their writings,<sup>74</sup> a use that has been noted earlier.<sup>75</sup>

*Philo (1c. B.C. - 1c. A.D.)*

The Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus<sup>76</sup> only uses οἰκονομία 12 times but is a contemporary of the writers of the New Testament, so his uses are especially significant from a synchronic point of view. The results are similar to what was seen in older Greek writers. Philo uses οἰκονομία to denote “household management”<sup>77</sup> in describing the role of Joseph in the house of Potiphar.<sup>78</sup> Similar uses are found in the context of women managing the home.<sup>79</sup> In addition, he uses οἰκονομία to denote the implementation of “policy” or “strategy”<sup>80</sup> in Jacob’s disguising of his hands. A comment on the same Old Testament passage (Jacob and Esau) is examined in *Questions in Genesis* where οἰκονομία is rendered in two separate uses “economy”<sup>81</sup> and “dispensation.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 51.26.

<sup>74</sup> Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *Thucydides*, in *The Critical Essays*, 10.4; 11.7; 35.9; 35.20.

<sup>75</sup> See Polybius, *The Histories*, vol. 3, 8.2.2.3; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, vol. III, 5.1.1.3; 5.1.2.3; 5.1.4.3.

<sup>76</sup> He is also known as Philo of Alexandria.

<sup>77</sup> Philo, *On Joseph*, Section 38, lines 5 and 6; Section 39, line 1.

<sup>78</sup> This narrative is worth citing:

So, while in outward appearance it was his purchaser who appointed him steward of his household (τῆς οἰκίας ἐπίτροπος), in fact and reality it was nature’s doing, who was taking steps to procure for him the command of whole cities and a nation and a great country. For the future statesman needed first to be trained and practised in house management (οἰκονομία), for a house is a city compressed into small dimensions, and household management (οἰκονομία) may be called a kind of state management, just as a city too is a great house and statesmanship the household management (οἰκονομία) of the general public. All this shews clearly that the household manager (οἰκονομικόν) is identical the statesman, however much what is under the purview of the two may differ in number and size.

<sup>79</sup> Philo, *Special Laws*, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), Book III, section 171, Line 1.

<sup>80</sup> Philo, *On the Virtues*, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), Section 208, line 3. See also Colson’s appendix for section 208 dealing with οἰκονομία (449-450).

<sup>81</sup> Philo, *Questions in Genesis*, Supplement I, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), Book IV, fragment 204, line 3.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Book IV, fragment 206, line 3.

## Summary of classical Greek uses

Among classical Greek writers, the term οἰκονομία displays a narrow semantic range and this semantic range remained very stable over a period of 600 years. From the time of Xenophon up through Philo, οἰκονομία has denoted the concept of management. The term is however flexible enough to denote various aspects of management, from that of a slave within his master's home, a king and his reign, and private citizens including that of men and women and more specifically, husbands and wives. The term was used by classical Greek writers in a general way to denote the simple management of a home, institution, or reign. In none of these uses does the term οἰκονομία denote time.

## LXX

There are only two uses of οἰκονομία in the LXX and they are both found in the same passage: Isaiah 22:19 and 22:21. These two uses of οἰκονομία are found in a context of judgment upon Jerusalem. In Isaiah 13-23, the prophet chronicles God's judgment upon the nations and when he comes to chapter 22, judgment upon Jerusalem is introduced (22:1-14). In 22:15 judgment is singled out for Shebna, the high court official or "steward." Shebna was one who was involved with the negotiations with Sennacherib during the besieging of Jerusalem by Assyria (2 Kings 18:18, 26, 37; Is 36:3, 11, 22; 37:2). It is clear from the context that he used his position for personal gain. He is condemned for trying to preserve his name in perpetuity by acquiring a prominent grave (22:16). As a result of this hubris, God promised to humiliate him (22:17-18). This would result in the loss of his position, as God declares,

I will depose you from your **office**,  
And I will pull you down from your station (22:19)

The noun "office" is οἰκονομία and it is parallel with the noun "station" (στάσις), a term that has the meaning of "place" or "position."<sup>83</sup> The LXX translates the Hebrew מַצֵּבָה, a term used in the Old Testament to denote a "station" or "office."<sup>84</sup> The use of οἰκονομία here speaks of an office or position in government, a use that has been found in the classical Greek writers.<sup>85</sup>

The second passage is 22:21 and here God continues his diatribe upon Shebna, declaring in 22:20 that he will summon Eliakim the son of Hilkiah in order to give Shebna's place to him. Isaiah writes,

And I will clothe him with your tunic,  
And tie your sash securely about him.

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<sup>83</sup> BDAG, s.v. "στάσις," 940.

<sup>84</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Hebrew and English Lexicon* ([Oxford]: Clarendon Press, 1907; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), s.v. "מַצֵּבָה," 662 [Hereafter cited as BDB].

<sup>85</sup> Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *The Roman Antiquities*, 11.19.5.3; see also πολιτικὰς οἰκονομίας in 20.8.2.2; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, vol. I, 1.95.1.4; and Aristotle, *Oeconomica*, 1345b, line 11.

I will trust him with your **authority**,  
And he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem  
And to the house of Judah.

In this verse, the term “authority” is οἰκονομία. It is the translation from the Hebrew term מְשָׁלָה, used in the Old Testament to denote the idea of “rule, dominion, realm.”<sup>86</sup> It is the rule or authority mentioned in verse 19 with the parallel term “station.” The authority of this office is represented with the parallel thoughts “tunic” and “sash.”

These only uses of οἰκονομία in the LXX speak of a place or position of responsibility.<sup>87</sup> The term does not communicate anything about an economy of time. One might argue that there is a time element in possessing a position of rule or authority, but that is not part of the lexical component.

While we only have two uses of οἰκονομία in the LXX, we do see that the use by the translators is a valid one. In other words, the use of οἰκονομία to denote the rule (or reign) is consistent with uses found in the classical Greek writers. It is these uses of οἰκονομία among the classical Greek writers as well as the LXX that form the background of this term for New Testament writers.

## New Testament

There are nine uses of οἰκονομία in the New Testament. Luke uses the term three times in his gospel (16:2, 3, 4) and Paul uses the term six times in his letters, three of which are in his epistle to the Ephesians (1:10; 3:2, 9). He also uses it once in three other epistles: 1 Corinthians (9:17), Colossians (1:25), and 1 Timothy (1:4). These uses are only listed here since they will be examined exegetically in the section below.

### Exegetical Evidence from New Testament Uses

#### Luke

Luke’s three uses of οἰκονομία all fall within the pericope of the parable of the unrighteous steward in Luke 16:1-9. In the passage Luke uses οἰκονομία 3 times (16:2, 3, 4) as well as the related noun οἰκονόμος or “manager” 3 times (16:1, 3, 8). In addition, he uses the verb οἰκονομέω in 16:2, the only use of the term in the New Testament.<sup>88</sup> As the flow of the passage bears out, there is no inherent element of time in any of the terms.

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<sup>86</sup> BDB, s.v. “מְשָׁלָה,” 606.

<sup>87</sup> See John Reumann, “Oikonomia—Terms in Paul in Comparison with Lucan *Heilsgeschichte*,” *NTS* 13 (January, 1967), who states that the uses of οἰκονομία in Isaiah 22:19 and 21 speak of “ruling power” and that “all this suggests the possibility that Yahweh’s ruling power or dominion could quite properly have been spoken of in Greek as his οἰκονομία, to use a good Stoic term, but the fact is that in Greek translations of the Old Testament we do not get this terminology” (151).

<sup>88</sup> There are only four uses of this verb in the LXX.



Luke records Jesus explaining the parable commonly referred to as “the unrighteous steward.” Jesus explains in verse 1 that there was a rich man who had a manager (οἰκονόμος). The manager had squandered the estate of the rich man and in verse 2 was called into account by the master for his management (οἰκονομία), and as a result could no longer be manager (οἰκονομέω). In verse 3 the manager (οἰκονόμος) panics because his management (οἰκονομία) is being taken away. In verse 4 the manager decided on a plan in light of his management (οἰκονομία) being taken away. As he quickly settled some of his master’s debts, the manager (οἰκονόμος) received praise from his master in verse 8.

It seems clear that the use of οἰκονομία in this parable denotes more than anything else, the task of management. Luke’s use of οἰκονομία is identical to uses found among the classical Greek writers, and in particular, the discussion between Socrates and Critobulus regarding estate management in Xenophon’s work, *Oeconomicus*.<sup>89</sup> In addition, just as Xenophon includes in the narrative the three Greek terms οἰκονόμος, οἰκονομία, and οἰκονομέω, so too does Christ in the telling of this parable.<sup>90</sup> Also, the use here of οἰκονομία fits well with the only two uses found in the LXX, namely Isaiah 22: 19 and 21 which were examined above. Luke records Christ using the term to denote the task of management, a use universally found in the classical Greek writers.

## Paul

More than any other New Testament writer, it is Paul’s use of οἰκονομία in Ephesians that is cited in support of definitions of dispensations. Before examining these uses, the other Pauline uses will be addressed.

### *1 Corinthians 9:17*

In 1 Corinthians 9:17, Paul is in the middle of a section dealing with Christian liberty (8:1-10:32) and he is addressing the issue of whether or not he as an apostle has a right to be supported from the ministry (9:1-7). His answer is yes (9:8-14) but that he had given up that liberty (9:15). He then declares that he was compelled to preach the gospel whether supported or not (9:16). Then in verse 17 he writes, “For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a **stewardship** entrusted to me” (εἰ γὰρ ἐκῶν τοῦτο πράσσω, μισθὸν ἔχω· εἰ δὲ ἄκῶν, **οἰκονομίαν** πεπίστευμαι)<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Xenophon, “Oeconomicus” in *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, 1.1.1-3.

<sup>90</sup> Only Luke picks up this parable, and one can’t but wonder if his classical training and exposure to Xenophon and the elaborate discussion between Socrates and Critobulus found a familiar ring to it in this parable which Christ told and which no one else recorded.

<sup>91</sup> The difficulty in punctuating this verse is summarized by Fee. He writes,

Did Paul intend, “If not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust given to me. What then is my reward” (NIV), or “If without choice of my own I have been entrusted with a charge, what then is my reward?” Although both come out nearly at the same point, grammatical considerations favor the former [Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 420)].

Paul was entrusted (πεπίστευμαι) with a stewardship or “commission”<sup>92</sup> (οἰκονομίαν). This stewardship, based on the context of the passage, is the gospel message which Paul was charged with preaching as an apostle. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles and entrusted with the gospel, did view himself as a steward or manager (οἰκονόμος) earlier in the epistle (4:1), and Garland makes the point that the connection between a steward and slavery is a clear one.<sup>93</sup> Fee notes, “His apostleship is similar to that of a ‘steward’ (usually as slave) who has been entrusted with managing a household. Such a person is entitled to no pay, which is exactly the point he will make in the next verse.”<sup>94</sup> Paul was responsible to dispense this stewardship and there is nothing in the context that argues that he is using the term to denote a temporal component. He is simply stating the fact of this stewardship. Paul is using the term οἰκονομία in the very same way as writers before him.

### Colossians 1:25

In Colossians 1:25, Paul uses οἰκονομία to explain his role as a minister of the gospel in the church. Paul opens his epistle with an acknowledgement of his prayer on behalf of the Colossian believers (1:3-12) and then embarks on an exposition of praise for the Son of God who is redeemer (1:13-14), God (1:15), Creator (1:16-17), and head of the church (1:18). Paul adds that this glorious Son was God the Father’s agent of reconciliation for sinners (1:19-23). For this great work of reconciliation, Paul adds that he was made a minister (1:23b). Paul added that he himself rejoiced in his own sufferings on behalf of believers and did his part of suffering on behalf of Christ’s body, which he called the church (1:24). Then in 1:25 Paul expounds the idea of his role in Christ’s body, the church. He writes,

*Of this church* I was made a minister according to the **stewardship** from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching* of the word of God,

ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν **οἰκονομίαν** τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ,

Paul’s call by God to a minister (διάκονος) was in “accordance with”<sup>95</sup> the “stewardship from God bestowed on” (τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν) Paul in order that he might “fully

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<sup>92</sup> The gloss of “commission” is one that is regularly found for οἰκονομία. Versions that render it this way are the NIV, NRSV, and ISV.

<sup>93</sup> David E. Garland. *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 426. The term “commission” has been inadvertently omitted before “(οἰκονομία)” when Garland writes, “The connection between (οἰκονομία) and slavery is clear from 4:1.” [This has been validated via an e-mail with the author, dated 6/5/10]. See also Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 696, who makes the same point, as does Wilfred Tooley in “Stewards of God: An Examination of the Terms *Oikonomos* and *Oikonimia* in the New Testament,” *SJT* March (1966), 80.

<sup>94</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 420.

<sup>95</sup> The preposition κατὰ with the accusative (τὴν οἰκονομίαν) can have one of several nuances. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 376-77. Most translations have rendered this expression “according to” (NASB, NKJV, NRSV, RSV, ASV, ESV, KJV) while the NIV has opted for, “I

carry out the preaching of the word of God.” Most identify this bestowal not as an office<sup>96</sup> but as his commission to apostleship.<sup>97</sup> This commission is simply stated as a fact and there is nothing contextually that argues for a temporal component to this commission. Again, Paul is using the term in the same way as earlier writers.

### 1Timothy 1:4

After an opening greeting (1:1-2), Paul immediately begins with a warning to Timothy regarding false teachers (1:3-7). In verses 3 and 4a, Paul reminds Timothy of his earlier exhortation to the young pastor to remain on in Ephesus to instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines nor pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. Such things, Paul says are fruitless, or in other words, “which give rise to mere speculation rather than *furthering* the **administration** of God which is by faith” (αἵτινες ἐκζητήσεις παρέχουσιν μᾶλλον ἢ οἰκονομίαν θεοῦ τὴν ἐν πίστει).<sup>98</sup>

In this verse, “administration” (οἰκονομία)<sup>99</sup> is in contrast to “speculations” (ἐκλήτησις). Reumann, who has done much work on the term οἰκονομία, notes the difficulty in determining

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have become its servant by the commission.” BDAG notes that κατά with the accusative, when used to convey the idea of similarity or homogeneity such as “in accordance with,” can simply mean “because of, as a result of, on the basis of;” s.v. “κατά,” B. 5. A. δ, 512-13.

<sup>96</sup> For those who do take οἰκονομία to mean “office,” in Col 1:25, see BDAG, s.v. “οἰκονομία,” page 697.1.b; John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, London & Glasgow: Richard Griffin & Co., 1856; reprint Minneapolis: James and Klock, 1977), 93.

<sup>97</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 153-54; David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 123. Moo’s point is worth citing. He writes,

*Commission* (οἰκονομία) sometimes refers to an office, as in Jesus’ parable about the “shrewd manager,” whose office is called an οἰκονομία (Luke 16:2-4). Many interpreters accept that meaning for this verse (cf. RSV, “divine office”), and some then go on to insist that we are facing again a post-Pauline “institutionalizing” of the ministry of the apostle. But it is doubtful whether “office” is a fair translation of the word anywhere in the New Testament. It has a more dynamic connotation, even in passages such as Luke 16:2-4: “stewardship,” “custodianship,” or perhaps “commissioning” (1 Cor. 9:17). Some argue that οἰκονομία here means “plan,” as it probably does in Ephesians 3:9, which is somewhat parallel to this text. But the Ephesian texts that are closest to our verse are 3:2 and 7: “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace which was given to me for you”; “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power” (cf. vv. 23, 25, and 29). In these texts, the “administration” (Gk. οἰκονομία) in v. 2 appears to be equivalent to the “gift of God’s grace” in v. 7 and refers to Paul’s apostolic commission. And Paul uses similar language elsewhere to describe his apostleship (note the language of “which was given me by God” in Rom. 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:9). These parallels suggest that οἰκονομία refers to his apostolic ministry. God chose Paul before his birth (Gal. 1:15) to become an apostle, with particular responsibility to bring the good news to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17-18; see v. 27). This is the “commission” of which he speaks here (153-54).

<sup>98</sup> The NIV renders this phrase, “These promote controversies rather than God’s work—which is by faith.”

<sup>99</sup> The text contains a variant for οἰκονομία, which is οἰκοδομήν, “edification,” which serves as a better parallel with ἐκζητήσεις, “speculations” [William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 22]. The most likely explanation is that οἰκοδομήν was inserted to clear up the harder reading and therefore the preferred reading of οἰκονομία. See Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 13nb; Walter Lock, *The Pastoral Epistles*,

the meaning here. He writes, “1 Tim. i. 4, about the ‘οἰκονομία of God which is in faith, is notoriously difficult to pin down as to meaning; it seems to me to mean ‘divine training’ (R.S.V.), a sense which οἰκονομία later had in Clement of Alexandria.”<sup>100</sup> While it is not within the scope of this paper to deal with how the early church fathers understood οἰκονομία, Reumann’s work is worth noting. He argues quite convincingly that in the early church, the terms οἰκονομία and διαθήκη are basically interchangeable.<sup>101</sup> Kelly sees the use of οἰκονομία here as denoting “God’s redemptive purpose accomplished in history” which is similar he argues, to the uses in Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9.<sup>102</sup>

The point here is that οἰκονομία denotes the administration or program of God.<sup>103</sup> These false teachers engaged in fruitless discussion, which does not further the work (οἰκονομία) of God in the world, a work that is appropriated by faith.

Our attention now moves to the three Pauline uses of οἰκονομία in Ephesians that figure so prominently in the discussion of the definition of a “dispensation.”

### *Ephesians 1:10*

In the opening chapter of Ephesians, Paul begins with a greeting to the believers that includes his desire for God’s grace and peace for their lives (1:1-2). In 1:3-14,<sup>104</sup> Paul offers up a call for God to be praised for his provision of spiritual blessings in the lives of his elect. This call for God to be praised (1:3) is based on three major aspects, namely, the election unto salvation by the work of God the Father (1:4-6), the sacrificial work of the Son (1:7-12), and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the elect (1:13-14). It is in the discussion regarding the sacrificial work of the Son in regards to the election of believers, that Paul first uses οἰκονομία in Ephesians.

Paul, having discussed the election of believers for himself (1:4) and his predestining of these believers unto adoption (1:5), notes that God did so for the praise of the glory of his grace (1:6a), grace which God the Father freely bestowed on his Son, who Paul calls “the Beloved” (τῷ ἠγαπημένῳ) (1:6b). Then in 1:7-12, Paul expounds this sacrificial work of the Son, stressing

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ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 9-10; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: United Bible Societies, 1994), 571.

<sup>100</sup> John Reumann, “Oikonomia—Terms in Paul,” 156.

<sup>101</sup> John Reumann, “Oikonomia = ‘Covenant’; Terms for *Heilsgeschichte* in Early Christian Usage,” *NovT* 3 (December, 1959): 282-92.

[NOTE: An interesting dissertation topic for someone with an interest in historical theology might be the early church Fathers’ understanding of the relationship of οἰκονομία and διαθήκη.

<sup>102</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Thornapple Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1963; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 45-46. See C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New Clarendon Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 41, who argues for a use of οἰκονομία in 1 Timothy 1:7 is more narrow in scope, denoting a particular application of God’s plan.

<sup>103</sup> The term θεοῦ is then a subjective genitive. It is the work or program that has its source in God.

<sup>104</sup> Ephesians 1:3-14 is one long sentence, containing a host of participial phrases all following the main verb of the sentence in 1:4, ἐξελέξατο. It is almost impossible to correctly understand how Paul is using οἰκονομία in the paragraph without at least surveying the argument beginning in 1:3.

three major provisions from God through Christ in order to procure God the Father's plan in 1:4-6.

First, in verse 7, he declares that this "Beloved," this Son of God, is the one "in whom" (ἐν ᾧ)<sup>105</sup> believers have received the provision of "redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses." This provision of redemption was based on<sup>106</sup> "the riches of His grace" (τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ).

Next, in 1:8-10, Paul shows that God also provided wisdom in order to comprehend the mystery of God's will. In 1:8, Paul continues to expound on "the riches of His grace" found at the end of 1:7. Regarding this grace Paul writes, "which he lavished on us in all wisdom and insight" (ἧς<sup>107</sup> ἐπερίσσευσεν εἰς ἡμᾶς, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ φρονήσει).<sup>108</sup> In other words, "the grace which provided redemption, God lavished on believers."<sup>109</sup> This lavishing by God of wisdom and insight toward believers is then qualified in the next verse.

In verse 9 Paul describes the manner<sup>110</sup> by which this provision of grace comes to believers, namely, that God "made known to us the mystery of his will" (γνωρίσας ἡμῖν τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ).<sup>111</sup> This disclosure of his will was "according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him" (κατὰ τὴν εὐδοκίαν αὐτοῦ ἣν προέθετο ἐν αὐτῷ<sup>112</sup>). As Hoehner notes,

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<sup>105</sup> See Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 205, who notes that ἐν ᾧ "relates back to the immediately preceding words referring to Christ, the beloved one."

<sup>106</sup> The preposition κατὰ has the emphasis here, "in accordance with." See BDAG, s.v. "κάτα," 511-13, B.5.γ, where BDAG notes that "instead of 'in accordance with' κατὰ can mean simply *because of, as a result of, on the basis of*" (513).

<sup>107</sup> The relative pronoun "which" (ἧς) and its use in this phrase is a matter of some discussion. Hoehner states that ἐπερίσσευσεν can be taken one of three ways: (1) intransitively with the relative pronoun ἧς used as an attraction for the dative relative pronoun ἧ meaning "wherein he has abounded" (AV); (2) intransitively and the genitive relative pronoun ἧς used as the object of the verb ἐπερίσσευσεν; and (3) the verb can be taken transitively and although the relative pronoun would normally be accusative (ἣν), it is a genitive relative pronoun ἧς since it is attracted to the genitive noun χάριτος. Hoehner settles for the third view, as do most commentators, with the sense, "which he abounded to us," or as many versions have, "which he lavished on us" (*Ephesians*, 210).

<sup>108</sup> There is debate among scholars and translators regarding how to punctuate verse 8. Some see the expression "in all wisdom and insight" (ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ φρονήσει) as modifying what follows in verse 9 (NASB, NCV, NRSV) while others (NIV, NKJV, NET) see the expression modifying the preceding relative clause, "which he lavished on us." Hoehner offers several reasons why the latter is preferred (*Ephesians*, 213). See also Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 107.

<sup>109</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 210. See also O'Brien who notes similarly, "Moreover, the riches of divine grace are the ultimate cause of our redemption" and then adds that "the generous bestowal of God's grace is accompanied by other spiritual gifts, namely, all wisdom and insight, which are mentioned because of their relevance to what follows" (*Ephesians*, 107-08).

<sup>110</sup> The action of the adverbial participle γνωρίσας is contemporaneous with the main verb ἐπερίσσευσεν in verse 8. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 625, and Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*, *Studies in Biblical Greek* 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 384, as stressing that a participle following the main verb describes contemporaneous action.

<sup>111</sup> Discussion about the meaning and significance of the term "mystery" is beyond the scope of this paper. For significant literature, see M. N. A. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity*

God made known the secret plan of his will which was according to his good pleasure which he purposed or set beforehand in Christ, or as in the NEB, “such was his will and pleasure determined beforehand in Christ.” The purpose of the Father was to be effected in Christ. Christ was the basis and goal of that mystery. Christ would provide the sacrifice and thus it would be possible to culminate all things in him, as outlined in the next verse. This was the secret of God’s will that could not be unraveled by human ingenuity or study.<sup>113</sup>

God did so because it pleased him and this act of God, Paul states, culminates in the truth declared in verse 10.

In verse 10 Paul writes that God made known to believers the mystery of his will “with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times” (εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν). The expression εἰς οἰκονομίαν modifies the verb προέθετο which immediately precedes it.<sup>114</sup> The verb προέθετο is complemented by the infinitive ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι, which serves to explain the meaning of the prepositional phrase εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν. The preposition εἰς should be understood here in a temporal manner.<sup>115</sup> Paul then defines or explains what he has just said. In other words, God’s making known to believers the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ has ultimate culmination in the administration suitable to the fullness of the times. That culmination is “the summing up of all things in Christ” (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ). The verb ἀνακεφαλαιώω, used only one other time in the New Testament (Rom. 13:9) and not at all in the LXX, likely has the sense here, “to bring something to main point,”<sup>116</sup> hence to “sum up.”

Paul is using οἰκονομία to denote an administration, specifically, one in which God is the manager. The idea of “a plan of salvation” is not what Paul is discussing here.<sup>117</sup> Rather, this

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(Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr), 1990; C. C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion: Meaning and Content* (Lund: Gleerup), 1977; Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

<sup>112</sup> The identity of “in Him” (ἐν αὐτῷ) can refer either to God or Christ. If it refers to God, then the pronoun is reflexive; “which he purposed in himself.” However the contextual and grammatical indicators favor that it refers to God. See Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 215-16, for reasons supporting a reference to Christ and not the Father.

<sup>113</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 216.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-17. Hoehner explains that εἰς can easily be understood in one of three ways: reference, purpose, or temporally. He argues that contextually, purpose and temporal make more sense than “reference.” He states that while purpose is possible, the mention of God’s purpose in verse 9 (προέθετο) makes this classification seem redundant. A temporal use of εἰς is common in the New Testament (BADG, s.v. “εἰς,” 288-89; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 369). For other classifications, see John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955), 50, who takes it “in reference to.”

<sup>116</sup> O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 110. O’Brien notes that this meaning is now “the increasing consensus among modern scholars” and that, “In connection with Christ’s eschatological relationship to a multitudes of entities (including personal beings), the text suggests that God’s ‘summing up’ of these entities in Christ is his act of ‘bringing all things together in (and under) Christ, i.e. his unifying of them in some way in Christ.’”

<sup>117</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*. 218. See also John Reumann, “Terms in Paul,” who states,

administration views God as acting, “as all the verbs describing his activities make clear. Hence, God purposed in Christ, in the administration (or carrying out) of the fullness of the times, to unite under one head all things in Christ.”<sup>118</sup> The fact that the passage makes use of terminology that describes or mentions time (“the fullness of the times”) does not mean that οἰκονομία denotes time in any way. It simply refers to God as administrating. The administration will take place *when* the fullness of the times has arrived. The NIV has captured this idea well, rendering verse 10 as follows: “to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” The things which will be summed up, Paul states are “things in the heavens and things on the earth.”

### *Ephesians 3:2*

The second (and third) use of οἰκονομία by Paul in Ephesians is found in a context dealing with Paul’s treatise on “the mystery of Christ” (3:4). In 3:1 Paul begins by stating, “For this reason” (τούτου χάριν). Given the context of both what follows this expression and what has immediately preceded it, it seems quite clear that he is referring to his treatment in 2:11-22 regarding the fact that believing Jews and Gentiles have been made into “one new man.”<sup>119</sup>

Paul then identifies himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.”<sup>120</sup> It seems clear that Paul was about to comment on this “new man” made between Jewish and Gentile believers. Specifically, he was going to make mention of prayer for them, but instead he abruptly digresses in mid-sentence to expound on the mystery of Christ (3:2-13) and his participation in it. It is only in 3:14 that he resumes his earlier intention of praying on their behalf, when he writes, “For this reason” (τούτου χάριν).

After identifying himself as Christ’s prisoner, Paul addresses his part in the program of God. In verse 2 he appeals to the Ephesian believers regarding whether they had heard of this bestowal of grace by God to Paul when he writes, “If indeed you have heard.”<sup>121</sup> What he is specifically asking them is whether they had heard of “the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you” (τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς).<sup>122</sup>

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“the meaning for οἰκονομία τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν is the normal Greek one of ‘administration’ or ‘arrangement’ of the fullness of times. Τοῦ πληρώματος is an objective genitive, and on the whole phrase almost the equivalent of ἵνα οἰκονομηθῇ τῷ πληρώματι.... One must be cautious here not to read into οἰκονομία too much emphasis on Heilsplan or some patristic plan-of-salvation sense. The wording here is not that of, nor the idea quite the same as, Gal. iv. 4, τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου” (164).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>119</sup> See Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 418; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 225; Eadie, *Ephesians*, 208-09. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 172, who notes that it refers back to 2:18-22 in particular.

<sup>120</sup> Just an interesting note that Paul was made a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles (3:1) while at the same time he was given the stewardship of God’s grace for them as well (3:2). The grace of God that allowed Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles also called him to be a prisoner for them as well!

<sup>121</sup> The first class condition (εἰ + indicative ἠκούσατε) has the protasis continuing until the end of verse 12 before διό in verse 13 introduces the apodosis.

<sup>122</sup> In this phrase, the expression “which was given” (τῆς δοθείσης) modifies “the grace of God” (τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ) and not “the stewardship” (τὴν οἰκονομίαν). This is different from what was found in Colossians 1:25

Paul declares that an οἰκονομία of God's grace was given to Paul, and that it was given to him for the sake of the Gentiles. Here in Ephesians 3:2, the emphasis is on Paul administrating what God had given to him by way of grace.<sup>123</sup>

Reumann demonstrates that Paul's use of οἰκονομία in 3:2 can be understood in one of five ways: to "denote Paul's activity as a steward; his office given him by God's grace; the administration of the grace given to him; or God's plan, and God's administration thereof; or some combination of these senses," before adopting a "double reference" view stressing "the divine administration" of the mystery and the role given to Paul to make it known.<sup>124</sup> Hoehner acknowledges that there is "some validity" to this conclusion since "surely, the administrator has to administrate something—that which has been delegated to him."<sup>125</sup> However Hoehner opts for a single reference here, arguing that "in this verse there is more emphasis on the position or office of an administrator than on the activity that naturally follows. In other words, the Ephesians had heard of Paul's position of an administrator."<sup>126</sup> O'Brien agrees, stating that the use in 3:2 "mentions particularly the role given to Paul, and this obviously has to do with his making the mystery known. On this view it does not mean God's salvation plan sure and simple, but the carrying out or administration of the mystery."<sup>127</sup>

In 3:3-5 Paul elaborates on the administration or stewardship of grace that God had given him, which he identifies as "the mystery." There does seem to be something of a chiasmic structure at work in 3:2-3 that helps to show how Paul equates the stewardship of God's grace given to him with "the mystery."<sup>128</sup>

- (3:2a) "if indeed you have heard of the **stewardship** of God's grace
- (3:2b) which was **given to me**
- (3:3a) that by revelation there was **made known to me**
- (3:3b) the **mystery**"

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when Paul wrote of "the stewardship from God bestowed on me" (τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι). See Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 424, for the reasons why the expression modifies τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ and not τὴν οἰκονομίαν.

<sup>123</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 174, notes regarding the slight difference between Eph. 3:2 and Col. 1:25,

The slight change of emphasis from Col 1:25 is in line both with this writer's earlier general stress on God's grace (cf. 2:5-8) and with Paul's own particular association of that grace with his apostleship (cf. Gal 1:15; 2:9; 1 Cor 3:10; 15:10; Rom 1:5; 12:3; 15:15). As in v 1, the readers are explicitly related to Paul's apostleship. That apostleship mediates grace. The grace was given to Paul, but it was for the ultimate benefit of these Gentile Christians—"for you." This assertion underlines that the subject of the digression is not simply Paul himself, but his ministry for the Gentile readers."

<sup>124</sup> John Reumann, "Terms in Paul," 165.

<sup>125</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 422.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 422-23.

<sup>127</sup> O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 227-28.

<sup>128</sup> Though I am sure I am not the first one in 2000 years to at least see the parallel thoughts here, I could not find such an observation. That fact alone makes me wonder a bit ☺.



Paul therefore in verse 3 declares the manner in which the mystery was revealed to him. In 3:4 and 5, he explains respectively the ability to understand and the timing of the revelation.<sup>129</sup> Then in 3:6 Paul identifies the content of the mystery. In other words, the stewardship that was given to Paul, the stewardship of God's grace for the sake of the Gentiles, the mystery revealed to Paul by revelation is now identified, namely, "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Therefore, in both Ephesians 1:10 and 3:2, there is no sense at all of οἰκονομία denoting a period of time or anything associated with time. Paul uses οἰκονομία in the same way as writers before him.

### *Ephesians 3:9*

The final use of οἰκονομία by Paul in Ephesians is found in 3:9 which is the same context as the use in 3:2. In 3:1-6, Paul described how God bestowed grace upon him, making known to him "the mystery of Christ." This "mystery" was in fact parallel to "stewardship" or οἰκονομία in 3:2. The mystery which was now revealed stressed that Jew and Gentile were fellow members of the same body of Christ. At the end of verse 6, Paul demonstrated that this reconciliation was accomplished "through the gospel." Next, in 3:7-13 Paul unpacks his role as a minister of that gospel.

In verse 7, Paul states that he was made a minister of that gospel by the act of God's grace. Then in 3:8, he introduces the twofold purpose<sup>130</sup> for why God had called him by grace to be a minister of this gospel. He states that to him, "the very least of all saints," God had extended grace in order "to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ."<sup>131</sup> In verse 9 Paul records the second purpose for which God had extended grace to Paul when he writes, "and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things." The coordinating conjunction (καί) and the infinitive (φωτίσαι) "make this expression parallel to the previous infinitive statement."<sup>132</sup> What Paul was called to do as a result of this bestowal of grace was also "bring to light what is the administration of the mystery" (φωτίσαι [πάντας]<sup>133</sup> τίς ἡ οἰκονομία τοῦ μυστηρίου). The verb "bring to light" (φωτίζω) is used figuratively here, as "to make something known," or perhaps better, "to

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<sup>129</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 434-44.

<sup>130</sup> This twofold purpose is contained in the two infinitives of vv. 8 and 9, namely, εὐαγγελίσασθαι and φωτίσαι.

<sup>131</sup> Paul's calling by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles is well documented in the NT (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17; Rom. 1:5; 11:13; 15:16; Gal. 1:16; 2:7ff; Eph. 3:1).

<sup>132</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 455; see also O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 243n84, who notes that "the infinitive expression 'and to enlighten' (καὶ φωτίσαι) is not an expansion or amplification of the infinitive 'to preach [the unsearchable riches]' (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) of v. 8."

<sup>133</sup> The textual reading of πάντας should probably be read given the strong support from all text types. See Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 455n1; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 167nd; Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 534, for an explanation. For the view that πάντας should not be read, see T. K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 87.

enlighten.”<sup>134</sup> To Paul, then, grace was given to preach Christ and to “enlighten all” as to “what is the administration of the mystery.” The use of οἰκονομία here seems to denote a “plan” or “arrangement” of God regarding the mystery.<sup>135</sup> It was Paul’s task to make known the mystery of Christ that was revealed to him, that Jewish and Gentile believers were fellow members in the body of Christ, the church. One could say that whenever Paul preached the unfathomable riches of Christ to a lost world, he was in fact also making known the plan of God for the church age, that there was now no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Paul was unpacking the mystery that was hidden in the Old Testament, but now made known to him by way of revelation.

#### *Conclusion of New Testament uses of Οἰκονομία*

The New Testament finds Luke and Paul using οἰκονομία in the very same way as earlier writers. Luke’s three uses in Luke 16 are very similar to uses found in Xenophon and Paul’s six uses follow similar uses found in the classical Greek writers, that of stewardship and administration.

#### **Exegetical Observations and Conclusions**

I believe the argument that οἰκονομία means “dispensation” in the way that some dispensationalists have defined a “dispensation” cannot be justified. The term οἰκονομία was never meant to carry all the theological emphasis that we dispensationalists have sometimes asked it to bear. In a sense, some dispensationalists have read into οἰκονομία a lexical component that it simply does not contain. At times, some dispensationalists have wanted it both ways. They have wanted the term “dispensation” to denote eras or periods of times which is understandable because Dispensationalism views God working in various economies of time. But then they have wanted to attach this definition to the Greek work οἰκονομία to add support to the concept. The problem is that οἰκονομία does not possess that lexical component. This methodology amounts to theological exegesis.<sup>136</sup> It is this type of theological

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<sup>134</sup> BDAG, s.v. “φωτίζω,” 1074.3.8.

<sup>135</sup> The use of οἰκονομία to denote “plan” or “arrangement” is a common one in the Classical Greek writers as was demonstrated above. See Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 455-56 who offers as a possibility, the idea of “strategy.” See also Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 184, who notes that “the grace given to Paul equipped him not only to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ but also to enlighten all about how God has chosen to work out his secret purpose” and that οἰκονομία denotes “God’s act of administering, how he has chosen to disclose and accomplish his purpose.” O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 243, has similar comments. Douglas Moo, *Colossians*, 154, also sees the use of οἰκονομία in 3:9 as denoting “plan.”

<sup>136</sup> See Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, for the dangers of infusing general terms with theological emphasis, especially critique of Kittel’s TDNT (206-62). As for such exegesis amounting to illegitimate totality transfer (Barr, *Semantics*, 218), this is not a valid charge since οἰκονομία does not possess a time component to begin with.

exegesis that drives our brethren on the other side crazy. This is ironic, especially when we often consider that this methodological error is what we see as their major guilt.<sup>137</sup>

Now many current dispensationalists have broken from Scofield and Chafer and have acknowledged that a dispensation is not time based but denotes an arrangement or management. They have also acknowledged that οἰκονομία does not possess the time component for which their predecessors had argued. These “tweaks” have been positive steps. They have, however, still appealed to οἰκονομία to make a case for Dispensationalism. John Feinberg has made the point that his fellow dispensationalists have in general erred in appealing to οἰκονομία in order to define Dispensationalism. Feinberg cites many of the dispensationalists above who have appealed to οἰκονομία to bolster their definitions of a “dispensation” within the system of Dispensationalism. His words should be carefully contemplated.

As to essentials of Dispensationalism, there has been much confusion. For example, traditional to dispensational thinking is that one defines Dispensationalism by defining a dispensation. More specifically, the approach is to offer biblical evidence that there are dispensations. Thus, dispensationalists typically note that “dispensation” (οἰκονομία) is a biblical word with a particular meaning, a meaning which supposedly not only defines a dispensation but Dispensationalism....

While οἰκονομία is a biblical word, and a dispensation is to be defined roughly as these men have, none of this defines the essence of Dispensationalism, a system or approach to Scripture. Thinking that it does errs in at least two keys ways. The initial error is thinking that the word “dispensation” and talk of differing administrative orders only appears in dispensational thinking. Which covenant theologian thinks οἰκονομία is not a biblical word? Moreover, covenantalists often speak, for example, of differing dispensations of the covenant of grace. Since both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists use the term and concept of a dispensation, that alone is not distinctive to Dispensationalism. It is no more distinctive to Dispensationalism than talk of covenants is distinctive to Covenant Theology. Dispensationalists talk about covenants all of the time.

This error, however, is at an even deeper level. The term and concept “dispensation” are not even at the essence of the system....Defining a word and defining a concept are not the same thing. Defining a word involves giving an analysis of the ways in which the word is used in various contexts. Defining a concept involves delineating the fundamental qualities that make it what it is. Dispensationalists apparently have not understood the distinction and so have assumed they could define a system of thought (a conceptual matter) by defining a word. Defining the term “dispensation” no more defines the essence of Dispensationalism than defining the term “covenant” explains the essence of Covenant Theology.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Methodologically, dispensationalists who appeal to οἰκονομία to defend both dispensations and Dispensationalism are guilty of reading theology back into a biblical term and covenant theologians who approach the text with a canonical hermeneutic read New Testament revelation back into the Old Testament. The methodology is similar.

<sup>138</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, 63-86, ed. by John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1988), 68-69.

While Feinberg is not specifically arguing that dispensationalists have erred by appealing incorrectly to οἰκονομία at a lexical level, he is stressing that defining a hermeneutical system by appealing to a single Greek term is flawed. In a sense, he is arguing from the other side of the coin, so to speak. When we see the term οἰκονομία in the New Testament, we should not think of theological dispensations. It is just a word and not a concept.

## Conclusion

Dispensationalism is best served by not appealing to a particular Greek term for validation. Dispensationalism is a hermeneutical approach for interpreting the Scriptures that does not depend on the lexical meaning of a Greek term, in this case, οἰκονομία. In the attempt to be “biblical,” it is tempting to find more in a term than is really there. This was clearly the case with Scofield and others who depended on his definition of a “dispensation” by an appeal to οἰκονομία. The lexical evidence is clear that οἰκονομία neither contains a temporal component at the core of this term nor is it anything other than a single word that is used to convey the basic idea of management or administration.

It might be best if we dispensationalists, when we use the term “dispensation,” did not appeal to the New Testament use of οἰκονομία at all, since οἰκονομία does not denote a “dispensation” as we tend to use the English term. It is clear that later dispensationalists have understood this truth and have attempted to erase any mention of *time* in the definition of a “dispensation.”

## A Challenge

We dispensationalists often chide covenant theologians for failing to appreciate the progress of revelation and for reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament. That methodological charge can be laid with us when we read theological meaning back into a term that was never intended to carry all the semantic meaning that we place upon it.

Someone may say, “You are weakening Dispensationalism.” Not at all. The basic tenets of Dispensationalism stand regardless. It is a hermeneutical approach to the Bible that is not dependent upon the use of one Greek term. I do not need to find the term “trinity” in the Bible in order to believe in the trinity!

Therefore we need to be careful how we use the term “dispensation” when we tie it to οἰκονομία. The onus is on us to prove lexically and exegetically that the term denotes the time element, or for that matter, the theological meaning, that we sometimes see in the English word “dispensation.” That task will prove unfruitful.

## A Helpful Analogy

I would like to suggest an analogy from the realm of sports that might help us understand οἰκονομία. There are some great team sports in our society: football, basketball, baseball, and hockey. Of these four sports, only baseball is played with no time periods. Baseball is played without time limits and technically, a baseball game can go on forever. I know, the league may

place limits, but this is an analogy and analogies don't walk on all fours. A baseball game will obviously be played over time, but time is not the crucial governing component of a game: innings are. The job of the manager is to manage the innings and not a clock. ***Time has no bearing on his task.*** When we think of οἰκονομία, it might be helpful to keep this perspective in mind.