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The “Self-Emptying” of Jesus: A Heavenly or Historical Decision? An Exegetical Paper on Philippians 2:5-11

Navigating through the Controversy

Philippians 2:5-11 is a highly controversial passage of Scripture. Lincoln D. Hurst says it is “one of the most disputed passages in the history of New Testament interpretation.”¹ Evangelical giant George Eldon Ladd exclaimed that the language of the passage involves “exquisite exegetical difficulties.”² The passage has been read, re-read, taken apart and put back together again in countless periodical reviews, journals, commentaries and books. Yet still the debate rages on, so much so, that even the best interpreters have begun to feel defeated. Gerald F. Hawthorne, author of the Word Biblical Commentary on Philippians laments, “The number of genuine exegetical problems and sheer mass of books and articles it has called forth leaves one wondering where to begin, despairing about adding anything new, and well-nigh stricken with mental paralysis.”³ Issues of original authorship,⁴ structural form,⁵ literary genre,⁶ sources used in its composition,⁷ and the meaning of words and

¹ Lincoln D. Hurst, “Christ, Adam, and Preexistence Revisited,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*. (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 84.

² George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 107.

³ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (ed. Ralph P. Martin; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 76.

⁴ Is the passage a pre-Pauline hymn that Paul altered for his purposes or did Paul create the rhythmic text?

⁵ Is the hymn composed of six strophes of three lines each, a series of couplets in six pairs arranged in such a way to lend themselves easily to a kind of antiphonal chanting, only five strophes of varying length, four strophes, each with four lines, or organized to correspond to three stages of Jesus’ existence? For the proponents for each perspective see Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 76-79. George Howard follows Jeremias’ arrangement as two strophes of four lines each, the second strophe a synonymous statement. See George Howard, “Phil 2:6-11 and the Human Christ,” *CBQ* (July 1978): 377.

phrases such as ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, ἀρπαγμὸν, ἐκένωσεν and τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα, plague any student eager to mine easy gems of understanding beneath the layers of historical barricades submerged under the interpretive earth.

Titillating Theological Questions

Connected to the nature of the passage, the sources utilized, and the allusions and echoes intended by Paul lurks intriguing Christological questions as well. Was Paul teaching or implying that Jesus existed literally as a non-human, God person prior to his conception and subsequent birth in Bethlehem? Did Jesus begin in heaven as YHWH, the one God of Israel, descend to earth, become a human being, and ascend back to heaven with the addition of a second and altogether new impersonal human nature?⁸ Largely based on this passage, traditional Trinitarian and hypostatic union theology answers in the affirmative. However, recent interpreters have emerged⁹ challenging the notion that pre-existence exists

⁶ Is this prose or poetry? This is one of the easier issues as scholars are virtually unanimous that it is poetic and rhythmic and therefore better seen as a hymn, thus the terminology “Christ hymn.” See Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 76.

⁷ What background are the allusions and echoes derived? Is the hymn best interpreted in light of the Gnostic Redeemed-Redeemer myth, Adam Christology, Jewish wisdom literature, Isaiah’s servant passages or a combination of some or all of the above?

⁸ The orthodox teaching that Jesus possessed an impersonal human nature is known technically as “anhypostasia.” See Herold O.J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in The History of the Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 186-89, 192. The reasoning behind this unusual doctrine is presented by Anthony Buzzard as follows,

If the ego of Jesus, the single center of his personality, is God, it must follow that the human element in him cannot be another ego or self. Thus it must be said that this humanity is really ‘impersonal human nature.’ To say that Jesus had a second human ego would make him two persons. (Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound*, Lanham: International Scholars Publications, 1998, 73)

⁹ I’m primarily referring to George Howard, J. Murphy-O’Connor, J.A.T. Robinson, Sir Anthony Buzzard, and James D.G. Dunn who all argue that Paul is thinking of the historical human Jesus from the beginning to the end of the passage. Subsequently, there have been prominent unitary monotheistic traditions like the Ebionites and Socinians in most periods of the church’s history. It is important to note that there would have been many more if believers did not wield the power of the state to destroy the works and person’s with whom they disagreed on theological matters. See Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The*

at all in the passage. I will exegete the passage with a particular ear to this issue, demonstrating that not only are the non-preexistent interpretations viable options, but more probable than their pre-existent predecessor counterparts based on Adamic Christology, Isaiah's servant passages, and the likeliest meaning of ἀρπαγμὸν.

Did You Get My Point?

It must be stated at the outset that even though there are very few technical aspects of this passage that expositors agree on,¹⁰ and I will focus on a question that is not the main, or possibly even a concern of the author,¹¹ the primary thrust of Paul's message is loud and clear. Paul desires that the Philippian believers unite humbly together so that he can rejoice in their togetherness to the glory of God. This one theme, one idea, one main thrust runs throughout the letter. Paul desires that the Philippians conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose (1:27; 2:2). Paul desired that they display humility, to think not only about themselves, but others as well (2:3,4). Paul wanted to see all of this come to fruition for his own happiness, joy, and satisfaction but ultimately for the glory of God (1:11; 2:2; 2:11).

Bases Covered

Paul gives the Philippian community a number of examples of this humility, but highlighting the letter is an example of Jesus their Lord. This is where the Christ hymn fits into the overall argument of the letter. After praying that their love would increase (1:9), Paul urges the assembly to act in a manner that is worthy of the good news (1:27). It seems that Christ

Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome (Orlando: Harcourt, 1999) for a vivid account of the political unrest, riots, power struggles, violence and bloodshed all surrounding the early debates concerning the nature of Jesus in the early church.

¹⁰ Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*. 76.

¹¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne says, Paul's motive...is not theological but ethical. His object is not to give instruction in doctrine, but to reinforce instruction in Christian living.... The hymn, therefore, presents Christ as the ultimate model for moral action. This is the most obvious and natural explanation for its appearance at this point in the letter, and it is quite in keeping with Paul's practice elsewhere of using the life/death of Christ as a pattern for Christians to follow (Rom 15:1-7, especially v 5; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; 2 Cor 8:6-9; 1 Thess 1:6; cf. also 1 Pet 2:20-21; 3:17-18). *Word Biblical Commentary*, 79-80.

is the primary example of this kind of sacrificial love, and therefore Paul uses it in order to encourage and inspire this kind of extraordinary humility. As the letter develops, we are able to discern that there are other examples to follow as well, including Paul himself. Paul notes that even he is being poured out like an offering as he serves the communities faith (2:17). He later explicitly tells the Philippians to join others in imitating his example (3:17).

Paul also mentions Timothy, who unlike others, thinking of their own interests and not that of Jesus Christ, takes a genuine interest in the Philippian church, and faithfully serves with Paul in the work of the gospel (2:20-22). Lastly, Paul gives the example of Epaphroditus. He is honored for almost dying for the work of Christ, placing his life at risk, the ultimate act of humility, in order to minister to Paul (2:30).

It is possible to conjecture that Paul may have foreseen objections from members within the community. Maybe imitating the mind of the Messiah was too lofty, too grandiose, too difficult to relate to. Some might have had difficulty comparing themselves to the one who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21). This may be why Paul gives himself as an example to follow. Others may have objected that he is an apostle, personally commissioned and empowered by Christ. Paul then gives his co-worker Timothy as an example and finally, to end all argument, Epaphroditus, one of their own. Apparently Paul knew how to cover all of his bases.

Clearly and unambiguously Paul wanted the believers in Philippi to display sacrificial love, humility and gentleness. He wanted this to be displayed to all (4:5), so that his joy would be complete (2:2). The Christ Hymn then, is used as his main argument. The Philippians were ultimately followers of Jesus, who modeled radical humility. Therefore, Paul called the congregation to have the same attitude, the same mind, the same spirit as the Lord they follow, Jesus the Christ.

When is Christ the Christ?

The first verse of the passage under consideration brings considerable insight into the pre-existent question under investigation. Paul says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Whereas most interpreters *assume* that Paul is thinking about a

pre-temporal, pre-existent, non-human, God person who descends to earth, presumably entering the womb of Mary at some point in order to add an impersonal human nature thus becoming in some sense human,¹² Paul seems to set the framework from which he is operating. Paul does not just say let the same mind be in you that is in *Jesus*, thus leaving open the door for a non-human, pre-conception, pre-existent Jesus, but have in you the same mind that was in *Christ* Jesus. This suggests that what is to ensue ought to be placed within the life of the historical Jesus, principally Jesus after his baptismal anointing by John wherein he became the Christ. Paul seems to set the historical Jesus that people knew, talked to, interacted with, that is “the anointed one Jesus,” “the messiah Jesus,” “Christ Jesus,” as found in most English interpretations of the Bible as the subject of the following hymn. This is probably the most overlooked and least discussed aspect of the Christ hymn within all of the pre-existence or non-pre-existence controversy. Maybe this is because it comes one verse prior to the hymn itself. If what follows from Paul’s pen is in reference to the human life of Jesus, that is as a summary of his humble obedience to God throughout his life, even to the point of the horrors of Roman crucifixion, there is no room for a pre-existent conception from this passage. This consideration may be the weight needed to tip the scales in favor of a non-pre-existent interpretation of the passage.

¹² I say in some sense human because it is questionable whether a non-human God person who had no beginning can have a beginning as a son or daughter of Adam and not be placed into an altogether new category, a hybrid of sorts. This individual would no longer be all that God is (eternally existent and immortal), yet not like other humans who actually begin in their mother’s womb, or at least by a special creative act by God like the first human being, Adam, according to the Genesis account. Many orthodox theologians seem to acknowledge this phenomenon by using the term “God-man.” However, it never seems to occur to many that it may be impossible to be at the same time both immortal and mortal. When pressed, many theologians say that only Jesus’ impersonal human nature died on the cross since his God nature could not die. These kind of *ad hoc* explanations are not uncommon. If only part of Jesus, that is one nature of two actually died, can it meaningfully be said that Jesus (the entire person) died for sins? The Scriptures do not make these kind of distinctions, chopping Jesus up like a pizza. If Paul, John, or any of the Scriptural authors wanted to communicate such an idea, they had the language within their vocabulary. Paul could have said, there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the *God-man* Christ Jesus if he chose. He could have called the one mediator a “θεος ανερ” (divine man), however, Paul chose to say that the one mediator between God and man, was simply the *man* Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5). As demonstrated “God-man” language is replete with logical problems which overall seem to be ignored or excused as a mystery.

Logic Excursus

Besides, who can know or relate to what it is like or what it even means for the so-called Creator¹³ of the universe to become a created being? Is this really a likely possibility in Paul's mind? Doubtful. Paul is a student of the Hebrew Bible which repeats itself in declaring that God is not a man, nor a son of man (Num 23:19; Is 31:3). God says explicitly, "For I am *God*, and not *man* – the Holy One among you" (Hos 11:9 NIV Emphasis mine). Paul follows this strict distinction and differentiation between God and man, the uncreated and the created, the Creator, and the creation in Romans where he says, "they worshipped and served *created* things rather than the *Creator* – who is blessed forever praised. Amen" (Rom 1:25 NIV Emphasis mine). Based on this background, it seems highly unlikely that Paul breaks from this solid foundation which would have given his opponents (3:18) great grounds to attack Paul, even better than Gentile non-adherence to circumcision, Sabbath or food laws. Even suggesting for a moment that the man Jesus was YHWH, the one God of Israel would have brought fierce controversy from among the Jewish believers. Our records show that this did not happen, which leads me to believe that Paul did not intend to teach such an abstruse doctrine, nor did the Philippian readers hear Paul as teaching such an idea. If there were even unintended remnants of something close to the traditional notion of a pre-existent God becoming man, we would surely expect the unitary monotheistic Jewish opponents to rail against Paul, accusations of polytheism would have been rampant, even if this was not Paul's position.

¹³ I use the term "so-called" because it is far from clear that Jesus ever thought of himself as the Creator, that is YHWH, the one God of Israel. In the gospels he is remembered in multiple pericopes as speaking of the Creator in the third person, "'Haven't you read', he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'" (Matt 19:4; Mk 10:6; 13:19 NIV). Some scholars point to passages like John 10:31 which remembers Jesus as saying "I and the Father are one." The context of that passage is that the two are one in their care for the sheep. This is not a metaphysical statement, but better understood functionally, they are one in *telos* (purpose). Both Jesus and God are unified in their concern for those who are vulnerable.

Metaphysics of Morphe

The phrase ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ is and has been a hotly contested phrase within NT interpretation. Numerous commentators have taken this phrase to mean that Jesus is God.¹⁴ The NIV is representative of this common interpretation, translating the whole phrase ὁς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ as, “Who, being in very nature God” (2:5). This is an ontological understanding of the phrase. It sees the word μορφῇ as meaning essential nature, essence, that is, the substance of which something or someone consists. However, many interpreters disagree with this rendition and understanding of the phraseology. Brian Peterson cautions the reader, stating forthrightly, “Paul’s focus here is not on Jesus’ ‘divine’ or ‘human’ nature, and we should be careful not to impose later Christological debates onto Paul’s words.”¹⁵

Adamic Allusions

It is at this point in the debate where James D.G. Dunn’s “Adam Christology” proposal becomes particularly helpful. He sees allusions throughout the text to Adam the original man who failed to do what Jesus the Christ is said to accomplish in the hymn.¹⁶ Some of the parallels almost jump off the page. Dunn sees the phrase “ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ” (in the form of God) as a nearly synonymous to the Genesis description of Adam as “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). He sees Paul’s phrase “did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped at” against the backdrop of Adam who actually desired to be like God so much so

¹⁴ The Cambridge Bible commentary is typical in its proclamation that this phrase means Jesus is God, stating, “Here then our Redeeming Lord is revealed as so subsisting ‘in the form of God’ that He was what He seemed, and seemed what He was – GOD.” H.C.G. Moule, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges: The Epistle to the Philippians, with Introduction and Notes* (ed. J.J.S. Perowne; Cambridge: University Press, 1899), 64.

¹⁵ Brian K. Peterson, “Philippians 2:5-11,” *Int* (Apr 2004): 178.

¹⁶ See James D.G. Dunn, “Christ, Adam, and Preexistence,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*. (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 74-83; *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*. (Second Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 114-21. Interestingly, it is in the forward of this second edition that Dunn explains that he now sees no literal personal pre-existence in the gospel of John, whereas in his first edition, John is the only author he thought possessed this perspective. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 281-8.

that he grasped at the opportunity by eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:5,6). Adam gave in to the temptation to go against God's prohibition, but Jesus is said to have been "obedient to the point of death" (2:8).¹⁷ Both allusions are contested, but the former point revolves around the language used. Critics point out that the LXX does not use the Greek word μορφή (form) in Gen 1:27, but εἰκόν (image). However, Colin Brown notes that the two terms do possess considerable overlap as they are used interchangeably in the LXX and regarded as synonyms in other ancient literature.¹⁸ Furthermore Dunn asserts,

The fact of the matter is that too much of the debate on the exegesis of this passage has displayed rather crass artistic or literary insensitivity. Allusions by their nature are not explicit. Poets or literary critics who had to spell out every allusion and echo would undermine their art, and deprive their more perceptive readers of the moment of illumination, the thrill of recognition.¹⁹

Rhythm, Glory, and Representatives

Further considerations should be noted. It is possible, even plausible that Paul chose to use the phrase word μορφή in the phrase μορφή θεοῦ because it worked so perfectly with the parallel phrase in verse seven, μορφήν δούλου. In this way, the hymn possessed rhythm and parallelism. Brown points out that the word μορφή is also closely associated with δόξα (glory).²⁰ Interestingly, the three terms (form, image, and glory) are linked together in other Pauline passages, particularly 2 Cor 3:18 (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49). In this fashion, Paul possibly perceives Jesus as the glorious human being that God originally intended (Ps 8:5,6). Comparative studies in Ancient Near Eastern texts reveal that Babylonian kings and Egyptian pharaohs were considered the image of their respective

¹⁷ For more parallels, allusions and further explanation see Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 114-21; *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 284.

¹⁸ See Colin Brown, "Ernst Lohmeyer's KYRIOS JESUS," in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*. (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 26. Take special consideration of footnote 122 on page 38 which provides the textual evidence. Morna Hooker also thinks the two terms have something to do with one another. See Morna D. Hooker, "Adam REDIVIVUS: Philippians 2 Once More," in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J.L. North*. (ed. Steve Moyise; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000), 224.

¹⁹ Dunn, "Christ, Adam, and Preexistence," 75.

²⁰ Brown, "Ernst Lohmeyer's KYRIOS JESUS," in *Where Christology Began*, 27.

deities.²¹ In this manner, it seems that Gen 1:26-27 assigns this role to humankind (cf. Ps 8).²² Jesus is therefore seen as the express image of God, God on earth, governing and ruling the rest of creation. Conservative linguist Kenneth Wuest seems to think that the term μορφή is better understood without the metaphysical baggage traditionally placed on the term²³ when he says the word came to mean, “a station in life, a position one holds, one’s rank. And that is an approximation of *morphe* in this context.”²⁴ This is confirmed by the BDAG which says that μορφή means “form, outward appearance, shape.”²⁵ The idea of inward essence, substance or nature is not even mentioned. This should at the very least call into question the NIV rendering “in very nature God” and conceivably expose a Trinitarian agenda this particular text does not support.

Furthermore, servants are not by nature slaves. It is probably more accurate to hear Paul as saying that Jesus functioned in the role, or status of a servant when he said that Jesus was took the μορφήν δούλου (form of a servant). Washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:3-17) is the classic example of Jesus, the anointed king of Israel functioning as a slave, the perfect embodiment of what it means to “empty oneself” (2:7) and consider the interests of others (2:4).²⁶ Gerald Hawthorne not only supports this reading, but also sees the entire foot-washing scene (Jn 13:3-17) as the principle background of the hymn.²⁷ On the other hand,

²¹ See footnote 136 in Brown, “Ernst Lohmeyer’s *KYRIOS JESUS*,” 40.

²² Brown, “Ernst Lohmeyer’s *KYRIOS JESUS*,” 40.

²³ For a summary of these lexicographers, see Robert Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1996), 338-9.

²⁴ Kenneth Wuest, *The Practical Use of Greek in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 84.

²⁵ BDAG 3rd ed, “μορφή” 659.

²⁶ Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 78-9.

²⁷ The parallels are fascinating, especially when viewed side-by-side as Hawthorne lays out in his commentary. When Jesus arises from the table and lays aside his outer garments, this is seen as the emptying in Phil 2:7. After the scene Jesus says, “You address me as teacher and Lord (κύριος) and rightly so, for that is what I am (Jn 13:13), which is seen as echoing “...that every tongue might openly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (κύριος)” in Phil 2:11. See Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 78-9 for further elaboration and detail.

this may more than likely be the first tip off that the author is thinking of and referring to the servant or slave in Isaiah's servant songs (Is 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). In this case, Jesus is being pictured as and viewed as the suffering servant in Isaiah. "In the royal terminology of the ancient Near East 'servant' meant something like 'trusted envoy' or 'confidential representative.'"²⁸ In this manner when the servant is rejected and suffers, it is akin to the one who sent the servant being rejected and suffering, in this case, the God of Israel.

God and Genitives

Last but not least, is the obvious fact that "God" in the phrase μορφῆ θεοῦ is in the genitive. Christ Jesus is the subject and God is the modifier of the indirect object form. Jesus is not God, but in the form *of* God.²⁹ There is a difference and a distinction between God and Jesus who is in God's form. This brings the focus back to our investigative question. Not only is Jesus not portrayed as God in this passage, but in light of the grammar, syntax, lexical word meaning, and Adamic allusions, the phrase is better understood as a reference to the second Adam,³⁰ the human Jesus, with no literal, pre-temporal, pre-existent, non-human God person in view.

Grasping At or Exploiting Godness

The phrase "did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped at" (2:6) raises another important issue in regards to the pre-existence question. The controversy centers on the meaning of the word ἄρπαγμα. The NIV and the NAB translate the word "something to be grasped." Since the English word "grasp" can mean either grabbing

²⁸ *The NIV Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1069.

²⁹ This is very similar to an illuminating remark by Colin Brown who said, Indeed, to be a "Son of God" one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's son. (Colin Brown. "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search Of Contemporary Orthodoxy." *Ex Aud* (1991): 88)

³⁰ There is evidence that Paul thought in these terms because he calls Jesus the last or second Adam in 1 Cor 15:45.

something that one does not have in order to get it, or unnecessarily clinging to something one already possesses (“exploited” NRSV), further inquiry is necessary. Is Christ Jesus being pictured as not grasping at equality with God in contrast to Adam (Gen 3:5), or is the idea that Christ Jesus possessed equality with God, but chose not to exploit his rights and privileges?

The noun form of the verb ἄρπαζω is rare in non-biblical Greek according to BDAG.³¹ In fact, it is not found at all in the Greek translation of the OT (LXX).³² The noun form is a type of hapax legomenon, the only noun form in the NT. BDAG defines the noun primarily as a violent seizure of property, or robbery.³³ Secondly, as something which one can claim or assert title by gripping or grasping.³⁴ As a subheading to this second meaning, which does not look that different from the first is the idea of grabbing booty, or a piece of good fortune, a prize etc....³⁵ Lastly, the least probable meaning is of a mystical rapture.³⁶ Although the word under consideration is not found in any other NT text, the root verb ἄρπαζω is found over a dozen times.³⁷ In all cases, the word is used in the sense of snatching something away, to seize and take it, never to indicate one holding on to something they already possess.³⁸ Furthermore, the adjective form ἀρπαξ appears four times in the NT, two of which are from Paul. A Pauline usage may help in determining his

³¹ BDAG 3rd ed, “ἀρπαγμοσ” 133.

³² BDAG, 133.

³³ BDAG, 133.

³⁴ BDAG, 133.

³⁵ BDAG, 133.

³⁶ BDAG, 133-4.

³⁷ E. Tiedtke, “ἀρπαζω” NIDNTT 3:601-5.

³⁸ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003), 58. BeDuhn’s charts between pages 56-9 are especially helpful in seeing how a variety of translations translate the word throughout the NT.

meaning of the noun form in Philippians. In both 1 Cor 5:10-11 and 6:10, while describing groups of people, all of the major translations use words like “extortioners,” “swindlers,” “robbers,” and “thieves.” Once again we are confronted with evidence that strongly supports the rendering and understanding of the word ἀρπαγμὸν that connotes the taking of something that does not belong in one’s possession versus holding onto something that one rightly possesses.³⁹

Based on this information, the NRSV translation, of “something to be exploited,” that is of something that a person already possesses is misleading.⁴⁰ The NIV and NAB rendering as “grasped” can be considered acceptable albeit leaving the reading a bit ambiguous. The best rendition would be something akin to “seized” with the idea of not considering snatching at equality with God. Jesus, therefore, although in the form/image of God, did not try to seize equality with God, as did his predecessor Adam.

Acknowledging Allusive Isaiah Allusions

In light of this Adamic allusion, Isaiah servant passages, and the similar phraseology in verse eight ἑταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν (he humbled himself), ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (he emptied himself), the “self-emptying” of verse seven can be seen as a summary of the entire life of the historical Jesus, culminating in death, just like the servant of Isaiah. In this manner, being found ὡς ἄνθρωπος (as a man) may have the connotation of an “ordinary” man, given the Adamic, but primarily the servant allusions taking place (cf. Is 52:14). Isaiah 53:2 says, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” Jesus is seen as Isaiah’s servant who did not stand out from anyone else.

³⁹ Adela Collins also notes that the word-family *always* has the negative connotation of robbery or taking plunder. See Adela Yarbro Collins, “Psalms, Philippians 2:6-11, and the Origins of Christology,” *BibInt* (3/4 2003): 367.

⁴⁰ Even if against the evidence provided, this is the intent of the word and meaning of the phrase, it should be recognized that equality is not identity. Some have used this verse to say that Jesus *is* God. Even if, Jesus is equal *to* God, he would still not be the God he was equal to.

This ordinary looking servant then metaphorically poured himself out like a vessel⁴¹ being emptied of its contents by displaying a humble, servant-like attitude. This is the point and context of the hymn. Paul is calling the Philippians to have the same attitude or *mind* of Christ (2:5). This humble attitude culminates in Jesus, pouring himself out in death.

Interestingly enough, Isaiah 53 mentions a servant being “poured out unto death” a likely parallel to “emptied himself” and “humbled himself” in Philippians since the latter is directly followed by “and became obedient to the point of death” (2:8). The likelihood of this being an allusion is bolstered by other servant passage allusions in Philippians 2. Isaiah mentions that after the servant suffers, “he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (52:13 NIV). It is difficult not to see what Richard Hays calls “embedded fragments” and “intertextual echoes” of Isaiah’s servant songs in Phil 2:9.⁴² It is virtually a direct quote of Is 52:13, hailing, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place” (Phil 2:9). Isaiah proceeds in the very next chapter saying the servant “will see the light of life and be satisfied” (53:11 NIV), followed by, “I will give him a portion among the great” (53:12 NIV). This resonates with the idea that God rewarded Jesus with resurrection, exaltation and the giving of a name that is above every name. That Paul had in mind Isaiah becomes a slam-dunk when he actually quotes Is 45:23 in verse 10,11 in Phil 2:10-11 with some modifications.

Heaven or Earth?

If Isaiah’s servant songs are the proper background for Phil 2 starting in verse seven and running throughout until verse eleven, libraries of commentators who have *assumed* that Phil 2:5-11 is referring to a heavenly scene, that is, a pre-temporal, pre-existent, non-human God person’s decision to add impersonal human nature, thus in some way becoming a man are badly mistaken. Re-reading this passage with Adamic and Isaiah allusions in view has the potential to ground our understanding in reality, that is on the Earth.

⁴¹ This is one of the primary referents of the noun. See Joseph H. Thayer, “*kevos*” *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 343. Also, see Brown, “Ernst Lohmeyer’s *KYRIOS JESUS*,” 13.

⁴² See Richard B. Hayes, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Hayes uses this type of language in reference to Adam Christology.

It is conceivable that Colin Brown is right in saying, “That which he refused to seize at the outset is freely bestowed at the conclusion”⁴³ This is in line with a re-occurring theme in Scripture, that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Prov 3:34; 1 Pet 5:5). God is one who exalts the meek (Lk 1:52). The passage concludes, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” (Phil 2:9-11). It is clear that Christ here is elevated to a supreme level, possibly even God-like status. However, there is debate⁴⁴ about whether the name that Jesus is given is Lord, as in the primitive confession throughout the NT (1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; Rom 10:9), or whether Jesus is given God’s personal name, YHWH.

Those that argue for the latter claim that the LXX translates the tetragrammaton as **κύριος**, thus, when every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is **κύριος**, it is in essence saying that Jesus is confessed as YHWH. Although this may be the proper reading, relying on the post-Christian LXX has been shown to be shaky ground. Discoveries in Egypt and the Judean desert reveal that in pre-Christian Greek Bibles, which the author of the text is using, the tetragrammaton was never represented by the surrogate **κύριος**, but typically left untranslated.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Jews continued to use the tetragrammaton in their Greek translations into the second century A.D. It is only later Christian editions of the LXX that have placed **κύριος** in place of the tetragrammaton YHWH.⁴⁶ Therefore, the author of the

⁴³ Brown, “Ernst Lohmeyer’s *KYRIOS JESUS*,” 24.

⁴⁴ There is also debate about whether the author of the hymn has pre or post ascension in mind when referring to this exaltation. The text itself does not mention an ascension at all, but neither does it explicitly mention a resurrection. Since Jesus is remembered as saying “all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me” prior to his ascension (Matt 28:18), it lends credence to the pre ascension idea. It is amazing how easy it is to think in terms of heavenly, ethereal scenes, when the entire passage may be placed on earth prior to the ascension.

⁴⁵ Howard, “Phil 2:6-11 and the Human Christ,” 383.

⁴⁶ Howard, “Phil 2:6-11 and the Human Christ,” 384.

hymn may have intended to convey that Jesus was given God's name YHWH, but not because κύριος was God's name in the LXX. The passage is probably saying that God gave Jesus the name YHWH, because that is the name that is above every name, thus making him the supreme Lord. Before there is a temptation to think that Jesus is God, it must be remembered that God has *given his* name to others in the past (Ex 23:21), and that the glorification of Jesus is for the ultimate glorification of the one true God of Israel (Jn 17:3), YHWH, "the Father" (Phil 2:11). Alternatively, it may be that YHWH is making Jesus, the *Adoni* of Psalm 110:1, David's Lord. Luke remembers Peter making this connection in his Pentecost sermon declaring that God had made Jesus who was recently crucified and resurrected both Lord (Hb. *Adoni*) and Christ (Hb. *Mashiach*) (Acts 2:36). Since Ps 110:1 is the most quoted and alluded to Christological text in the NT, this is a real possibility as well. Since the quote is from Isaiah, I think the former is more likely than the latter.

Hailing Humility

As has become obvious, this passage is filled with debate. I am in full agreement with Ralph P. Martin who says, "Phil 2:5-11 taxes the skill of the translator, as many of the key words, especially to do with the presentation of Christ's role in the text, baffle the lexicographer's mind and offer a wide, often puzzling, variety of choice and interpretation."⁴⁷ However, I think we have made ground. It appears that this complicated text is best read against two specific backgrounds which illuminate the passage. The author begins with a comparison of Christ to Adam, who though given a glorious state of existence, wanted more, in fact, tried to steal what was not properly his (Phil 2:6). The rest of the hymn is best read with Isaiah's servant songs in mind. There are multiple Isaianic allusions and echoes which are hard to miss, yet this seems to be the least appreciated and taken for granted backdrop for the controversial passage. Neither of these backdrops have been found to contain any notion of a pre-temporal, pre-existent, non-human God person making a heavenly decision to add an impersonal human nature, in some sense becoming man. The text is better understood in light of Adamic and Isaianic themes, wherein the humility and emptying of Jesus was that of

⁴⁷ Ralph P. Martin, "Carmen Christi Revisited," in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*. (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 2.

the servant in Isaiah who poured himself out unto death. This places the language of the text within the life of the historical human Jesus (1 Tim 2:5). At the end of the day, what is most important is that we all display the Christ-like humility that Paul was encouraging the Philippians to imitate; irrespective of whether Christ's *kenosis* was heavenly or historically situated.

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