

# TAKING PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11 OUT OF THE VACUUM: A FRESH READING OF THE CHRIST-HYMN IN LIGHT OF THE SOCIAL-ETHICAL ARGUMENT OF PHILIPPIANS AS A WHOLE

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## Survey

Philippians 2:6-11 is commonly cited as a straightforward statement concerning the preexistence, equality with the Father, and divinity of Jesus Christ. Various interpreters, reading the passage as a descending and rising poem, see the divine Son of God emptying himself of his divine attributes, descending from heaven to the low point of the cross, and upwards again in exaltation and universal lordship.

This understanding has been justifiably called into question because of the reoccurring *presupposition* of a preexistence theology.<sup>1</sup> James D. G. Dunn, among others, argues that the Christ-hymn is best understood as an expression of Paul's Adam Christology,<sup>2</sup> claiming that this reading yields no proof of the supposed preexistence. Others have argued that the hymn speaks of the human historical Jesus living a life of humility and

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<sup>1</sup>: "This straightforward interpretation has to assume that Christ's pre-existence was already taken for granted — an assumption we cannot yet make on the basis of our findings thus far" (James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 114.

<sup>2</sup> See discussions and exegesis in Dunn's *Christology in the Making*, 114-128; *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 281-288; Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin*, New York: Crossroads, 1992, 243-264. N.T. Wright also holds to Adam Christology, but argues for preexistence. See Wright's *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 56-98 and *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, John Knox Press, 2004, 100-104.

obedience.<sup>3</sup> While both of these options have attractive qualities, are well-researched, and show no preexistence, I feel that they leave out the wider context of the letter of Philippians as a whole. Is Philippians 2:6-11 a stand-alone passage in the letter, or does it set the foundation for interpreting vital parallel subsequent passages?

The key exegetical question needs to be pressed hard: what would the apostle Paul have wanted *his readers in Philippi* to understand from the Christ-hymn? All too often, readers looking for passages to support their preconceived conclusions to the question of incarnation, feel satisfied with a simple, 21<sup>st</sup>-century reading of the passage. It *looks, sounds, and feels* like preexistence and incarnation. Yet context needs to be established first before we look to various options of interpretation. This article intends to show that Philippians 2:6-11 is best understood within a fresh reading of the epistle as a whole while focusing on how the passage becomes foundational for Paul's subsequent social-ethical arguments (3:3-11 and 3:17-21).

Since much of the scholarly debate has centered around the meaning of key words in the passage, a fresh translation is needed (2:5-11):

Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus  
who existing in the form of God,  
did not count that equality with God as something to be  
exploited for his own benefit  
but he emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
becoming in the likeness of mankind.  
Being found in the form as man, he humbled himself,  
becoming obedient to death, even death of the cross.  
For that reason God super-exalted him and has given him the  
name above all names,  
in order that in the name of Jesus every knee will bow  
those in heaven, and those on the earth, and those under the  
earth,  
and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is lord,<sup>4</sup> to the  
glory of God the Father.

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<sup>3</sup> See John A. T. Robinson's *The Human Face of God*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973, 162-166; Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, International Scholars Publications, 1998, 99-104.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the original readers of this hymn, the Philippians, would have seen this as an open attack on the reigning emperor Nero, who was called κύριος. The declaration that "Jesus is lord" would inevitably mean for them that Nero no longer could be heralded with that title.

### Formal Analysis

Due to the nature of the text, including its difficulty and vocabulary, key discussion needs to take place in regard to four particular words:

ὑπάρχων  
μορφῇ  
ἄρπαγμὸν  
ἐκένωσεν

We read in 2:5-6 the command to “Have this mind in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who existing (ὑπάρχων) in the form of God.” ὑπάρχων is a present participle with Christ as its antecedent. It is Messiah Jesus whom the hymn speaks of as of existing (in the present tense) “in the form of God.” Many expositors have made a leap at this point, based on their preconceptions. They have bypassed the present participle in order to place Jesus back in the past.<sup>5</sup> Yet the Messiah (Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) is never thought to be literally a preexistent figure in 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism.<sup>6</sup> He was to be God’s chosen human agent in whom all of Israel’s purposes would come to pass. It was the human historical Jesus to whom Paul referred.<sup>7</sup> Since verse 5 introduces the passage, not as a theological treatise on the nature of the person of Christ, but rather as an ethical exhortation<sup>8</sup> to have the mindset of Jesus, the correct rendering of ὑπάρχων becomes all the more important. All of this evidence points to the fact that the issue at hand revolves around following the moral example of the historical Jesus. This is the guiding context right from the start. Overlooking this fact makes way for a

<sup>5</sup> The problem possibly could be traced all the way back to Justin Martyr, who used προὑπάρχω (preexisted) of Jesus. This is *never* used of Jesus in the New Testament.

<sup>6</sup> Any citing of the passages in the *Similitudes* of 1 Enoch should not be considered. The fact that Cave 4 of Qumran has yielded fragments of *every* section of 1 Enoch *but the Similitudes* points to the conclusion that they are a post-A.D. 70 addition. E. Isaac makes the following statement in his translation: “1 Enoch is clearly composite, representing numerous periods and writers” (James Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:6-7).

<sup>7</sup> Debate still continues as to whether the hymn was a pre-Pauline formation or a Pauline construction.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Hawthorne makes the same argument: “Although it may have been originally composed for christological or soteriological reasons, Paul’s motive in using it here is not theological but ethical. His object is not to give instructions in doctrine, but to reinforce instruction in Christian living. And he does this by appealing to the conduct of Christ. The hymn, therefore, presents Christ as the ultimate model for moral action” (*Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43, Waco: Word, 1983, 79).

preexistent Jesus to take shape in the hymn. Paul could have easily said that Jesus *preexisted* in the form of God, but he didn't. Readers should discontinue reading the passage as if Paul really meant to.

Once ὑπάρχων has been pinned to the human historical Jesus (and not to a preexistent being) then we can confidently move to the phrases μορφή Θεοῦ/μορφή δούλου. Various options have been presented to explain precisely what μορφή means. These options include “form,” drawing upon its usage in the Greek literature. Others suggest δόξα (“glory”) by comparing the equivalent external radiance of God in the Old Testament. Still others see it as synonymous with εἰκών<sup>9</sup> (“image”) in light of the Adam/Christ comparison frequently used by Paul.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the imagery of “status” or “position” is another possibility. To make things even more slippery, the phrase is governed by the preposition ἐν (in, inside, in the sphere of?). While all of these options are possible, the further context of chapter 3 will later be brought in to help bring us to a conclusion. J. Behm rightly gives a warning that the antithesis between μορφή Θεοῦ and μορφή δούλου “can be understood *only* in light of the context.”<sup>11</sup> His advice will be heeded in this study, for until adequate attention can be given to that context, the decision on the interpretation of μορφή should be tabled.

ἀρπαγμὸν has been debated for some time now. It has generally been narrowed down to two possibilities. It could mean, in reference to *equality with God*, something that one does not have but tries to obtain. It could also refer to something one has but does not use to his own advantage.<sup>12</sup> Again, like μορφή, this can go either way.<sup>13</sup> This too will have to be tabled until the context of chapter 3 reveals more information.

ἐκένωσεν is not a debated word in regard to definitions. It is the application to the person of Christ which is still discussed. Yet, if the interpretation of the human historical Jesus is correct in regards to ὑπάρχων, then the “emptying” is something that is exhibited in his earthly ministry. The other key is that of the controlling ethical framework set by verse 5 of imitating the mind and actions of Christ

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gen 1:26-27 LXX.

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 5:18-19; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45-47.

<sup>11</sup> μορφή in Behm's *TDNT*, 4:751, emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> After a descriptive summary of the options, Foerster concludes that “against all expectation, Jesus did not regard equality with God as a gain to be utilized.” See “ἀρπαγμὸν” in *TDNT*, 1:474.

<sup>13</sup> The Hellenistic Greek writers don't help matters when they tend to blur the distinctions instead of being consistent with one or the other.

Jesus. Paul would hardly be exhorting the Philippians to follow the example of a divine being who one day decided to become a man, for that analogy is too distant to even be remotely practical. It also does not make much sense that a divine being who is *acquiring human nature* would be spoken of as “emptying” himself. The self-sacrificial life of the human Jesus makes the best sense of the evidence.

### Detailed Analysis

The evidence that we have uncovered so far can be briefly summarized in the following: Paul commands the believers in Philippi to follow the ethical example of Jesus, who took upon himself the μορφή δούλου in obedience (resulting in death), and God in turn vindicated him by a resurrection to glory.<sup>14</sup> Keep this big idea in mind, because Paul is going to use it again soon. What follows in chapter 3 is a close-knit argument where Paul exhorts his converts to follow his example in not using their privileges to their own advantage, but rather laying them aside in hope of a future vindication via resurrection.

Let us examine one passage at a time. In 3:3-11 Paul makes it clear that his human advantages (birth, religion, position in society, etc.) were found to be of no value. What he goes on to speak about is his daily striving in obedience to conform to the death of Christ in order to attain to the subsequent resurrection of the dead. Note clearly that Paul is using the very same argument as our interpretation of 2:5-11. Where Jesus is said to have taken upon himself the μορφή δούλου in humility to the point of death, Paul likewise strives to be συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ (conformed to [Christ’s] death)!<sup>15</sup> The result is also the same as the Christ-hymn; both end in a resurrection of vindication. Paul, who had the right to take advantage of his impressive list of privileges, instead chose to lay them aside in favor of seeking the things of God. This parallels

<sup>14</sup> The specifics given here are absolutely crucial, and the subsequent details will only add clarity and confidence to the exegetical choices already made.

<sup>15</sup> Hawthorne admits that Paul recalls the μορφήν δούλου from Phil. 2:6-8 when he speaks of himself with the similar language of συμμορφιζόμενος. The fact that this is a hapax legomenon indicates that Paul was very intentional in his selection of words. The almost identical words are no mere coincidence. He intends to show that he himself is imitating the actions of Christ described in 2:6-8. See Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 145. N.T. Wright also makes this connection: “3:7-11 is modeled on 2:5-11...Paul did not regard his covenant membership in Israel as something to be exploited” (see N.T. Wright’s “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire” in Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000, 177).

nicely with the option of understanding ἄρπαγμὸν as something one has but does not use to his own advantage. As Philippians 2:5 starts out the hymn with the imperative to “have this mind in yourselves,” Paul makes the same summons of his converts (including himself) that “we must have this attitude” in 3:15.

The parallels are too obvious to ignore. As Jesus chose to lay aside his rights in favor of an obedient life leading to death and a vindicating resurrection, Paul says that he himself is doing the very same thing! Jesus is the example and Paul is imitating it in a way that he hopes his Philippian converts will follow.

Paul asks his readers to likewise lay aside their rights in order to live the self-sacrificial life of obedience, which promises a glorious resurrection to glory. The parallels in 3:20-21 are even more striking to 2:6-11:

3:20-21	2:6-11
σύμμορφος (“conform,” 3:21)	μορφῇ (“form,” 2:6, 7)
ὑπάρχει (“is,” 3:20)	ὑπάρχων (“existing,” 2:6)
μετασχηματίσει (“change the likeness,” 3:21)	σχήμα (“likeness,” 2:8)
ταπεινώσις (“humble state,” 3:21)	ἐταπείνωσεν (“humbled,” 2:8)
ὑποτάξαι αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα (“subject all things to himself,” 3:21)	πάν γόνυ κάμψη (“every knee will bow,” 2:10)
κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός (“the lord Jesus Christ,” 3:20)	κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός (“Jesus Christ is lord,” 2:11)
δόξα (“glory,” 3:21)	δόξα (“glory,” 2:11)

Again we find the same themes in 3:20-21 as we find not only in 2:6-11 but also in 3:4-11. We see many similar linking threads running through all three passages: (1) the call to imitate Jesus, (2) the laying aside of privileges, (3) the use of μορφῇ or its close cognates, (4) the self-sacrificial life of obedience, (5) the corresponding humility involved, and (6) the promise of a vindication by resurrection to eternal life. Note carefully how Paul asks his converts to follow his example (3:17) and Paul follows Christ’s example (2:5).

**Synthesis**

These governing linking themes persuade me that much exegesis done on Philippians 2:6-11 has not taken note of the surrounding context. It is clear when one examines the vocabulary, structure and flow of the arguments, that Paul intended the life of Jesus to be the model for the

lives of his converts as well. Is it a coincidence that one of the possible (and likely) outcomes of exegesis for the Christ-hymn happens to be the very same argument Paul himself takes and summons his converts to adopt? In all likelihood, Paul intended the moral/ethical exhortation to look like:

Jesus Christ (the example) → Paul (the *commissioned* apostle) → Paul's  
Philippian converts

It seems that the Christ-hymn is to be best understood in light of the continuation of the argument as seen in chapter 3. Let me reiterate my point for clarity: any interpretation of 2:6-11 has to flow in line with the obvious and intended parallels in 3:4-11 and 3:20-21 respectively. The similarities between 2:5-11 and the argument of chapter 3 can no longer be overlooked.

How do the missing links of 3:4-11 and 3:20-21 help narrow down (or illuminate) possible understandings of 2:6-11? The Adam Christology option, which admittedly looks quite convincing, starts to look less probable. Paul does not compare himself to Adam, nor does he relate Adam to his converts. It may fit in well with 2:6-11, but due to the similarities between the three passages studied, the Adam motif does not quite fit. The argument for a preexistent being accompanied with a high *kenosis* theory also looks very unlikely. Neither Paul nor his converts are emptied or have any sort of preexistence. Their *kenosis* is not to be understood as an emptying of divine attributes but rather as a life of sacrifice, obedience, and leaving aside of their own will in favor of the will of God.

This makes most likely the reading of Philippians 2:6-11 as a definition of the human historical Jesus, who laid aside his rights as the Messiah, and chose to serve God's purposes leading to death. Paul wants the believers at Philippi to lay aside their privileges<sup>16</sup> and rights in order to take upon themselves the μορφή δούλου (status of a servant). Jesus did

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<sup>16</sup> Although there is not enough room to elaborate this point, Paul most likely had in mind the allegiance to the imperial Caesar cult which many of the Philippians possessed. This included social benefits, positions of status/prominence, and involvement in festivals for the living (and deified) emperors. Paul here is using his counter-imperial theology, which he already exhibited in calling Jesus the κύριος (an obvious Caesar title in the minds of the Philippians). See Richard Horsley's *Paul and Empire*, Trinity Press, 1997; N.T. Wright's "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" in Horsley's *Paul and Politics*; and N.T. Wright's *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, Fortress Press, 2006.

it, Paul is doing it, and his followers are called to become the next in line. Just as the human Jesus obeyed the covenant plan of God and is now identified as the lord of the world, so the Messiah's people are to find their identity, not in their surrounding culture, moral achievements, or status, but rather as children of God and followers of Christ. This makes better sense of Paul redefining the people of God as the *true circumcision* in Philippians 3:3.

### **Reflections**

At this point in the study, our findings should be gathered and summarized.

First, it is recognized and admitted by many that the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 can be understood and interpreted in more than one way, whether it be an Adam Christology, preexistence/kenosis, *functional* equality, etc.

Second, we noted that the rules of hermeneutics and exegesis require us to pay close attention to the contextual argument of the letter of Philippians as a whole (which has typically been overlooked or ignored by expositors in the past).

Thirdly, we found that Paul wishes for his converts in Philippi to follow his example of laying aside their privileges and rights (Paul was most likely referring to their involvement with the imperial Caesar cult) just as Paul laid aside his merits as a blameless Pharisaical Jew.

Finally, we concluded that since one of the possible (and very likely) interpretations of Philippians 2:6-11 was a summons to follow Jesus' example of not taking advantage of his position as the Messiah but rather living a self-sacrificial life of obedience to the Father which brought about a resurrection of vindication — it should emphatically be recognized that this *fits the moral/ethical teaching of the letter as a whole*.

Therefore, I conclude that Philippians 2:6-11 is not a hymn about a preexistent divine being who gives up being God but rather about the human historical Jesus who shows his followers how to live a humble and obedient life which promises a resurrection to eternal life. May this mind be in us all, as it was in Christ Jesus.