

Obedience and Humility of the Second Adam: Philippians 2:6-11

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Philippians 2:6-11 is widely regarded as an early Christian hymn which Paul employed in writing the letter to the saints at Philippi. It served to emphasize Paul's desire that the virtues of obedience and humility would be present and ever increasing among those in the church. Paul uses the supreme example of Christ and his willingness to die upon the cross. The hymn reflects an "Adam Christology" which was present in Paul's writings and in the theology of the early church. The first Adam failed; the last Adam was victorious. The first Adam was debased; the last Adam was exalted.

I. FORM AND CONTEXT

The form of Philippians 2:6-11 is considered to be that of a hymn or a confessional statement. It has the quality of poetry about it. It is considered to be poetry for the following reasons: 1) the rhythmical quality of the sentences; 2) the use of parallelism based on the number of syllables in a line; and 3) the presence of rare words and phrases.¹

One engaging feature of the hymn is the presence of rare words. It has been observed that poetry tends to operate with an unusual vocabulary. *Harpagmos* (a thing to be grasped) and *huperupsoo* (to highly exalt) are found nowhere else in the NT. *Morphe* (form) is found only here in Paul's writings and only once more in the NT, in Mark 16:12. *Hupekoos*

¹ R. P. Martin, *An Early Christian Confession*, London: The Tyndale Press, 1960, 9.

(obedient) is found elsewhere only in Acts 7:39 and 2 Corinthians 2:9. One possible explanation for the presence of these rare words is that the “Greek text is based on an underlying Aramaic original.”² All of this has served to make exegesis a difficult matter as scholars continue to debate the meanings and exact nuances of the rare words and phrases. This evidence also fuels the debate over authorship. Is the hymn of Paul’s composition or did he appropriate it from another source? If it was not of Paul’s composition, its probable source was the liturgy of the early church. We might imagine Paul using a “hymn” of the early believers to “illustrate” his point to the Philippian church (like many modern preachers).

In Paul’s use of the hymn, where does his intent and purpose become clear? First, we must consider what was happening in the lives of both Paul and his intended audience. One striking feature of the letter is Paul’s emphasis on his own suffering on behalf of the Lord and on behalf of the Philippian church. Paul introduces himself in 1:1 as a servant (*doulos*) of the Lord. This feature is not common to all of Paul’s letters. Elsewhere only in Romans 1:1 and Titus 1:1 does Paul introduce himself as a servant. In Philemon, though, he calls himself a “prisoner.” Usually he gives himself the title of an “apostle.” Perhaps this reflects Paul’s humble state of mind here in Philippians. The word *doulos* (slave/servant) occurs only twice in Philippians: once in 1:1 in reference to Paul and his companion Timothy, and again in 2:7 referring to Jesus taking the form of a *doulos*. Paul may be alluding to his emulation of the example of Jesus.

It is obvious that Paul is in prison (1:7). However, he sees his imprisonment and suffering as an opportunity for the gospel. He writes, “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped the spread of the gospel . . . the brothers and sisters having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness” (1:12, 13).³ Paul is concerned not for himself but that Christ would be exalted, whether it be in his life or death (1:20). Yet, Paul is concerned for the welfare of the Philippians (1:24). He writes, “But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and offerings of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (2:17). Paul is sharing in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of the church. He holds himself up as an example of those who suffer (3:10). Paul also employs

² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

the example of Epaphroditus who “came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me” (2:30). The sincerity of Timothy is contrasted with those who are “seeking their own interests” (2:21).

Paul is concerned that the Philippians model this humility and selfless service in their own community of faith. Suffering is a part of the life of faith: “He has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well” (1:29). It seems that the Philippians were, at this time, also suffering (1:30). In spite of this experience of suffering for the faith, Paul encourages them:

Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from empty ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (2:3-4).

As we study the hymn itself, we must not forget Paul’s intent and purpose in its use. Paul is exhorting the Philippians to unity, humility, obedience and selflessness in a time of persecution. It is in difficult times that these virtues would be severely taxed. He prefixes the hymn (2:6-11) with the words, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (v. 5). Whether or not it is intended, the context for interpreting this hymn has usually been the later Christological debates of the second and third centuries. The hymn has been turned into a metaphysical statement. Its original context, the suffering of Paul and the Philippians, was much more “human.” Paul’s intent was to encourage the beleaguered Philippians with an example and model of one who made the right choices in difficult times. The point of the hymn in this context is that suffering, humility, and obedience to God and for the community of faith lead to exaltation. Paul invites the Philippians to enter into this process. Paul has already entered it as he follows the example of Jesus Christ. In Philippians 3:10-11 Paul writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” The Philippians are called to become one with Jesus in his sufferings and eventually share in the likeness of his resurrection.

Further, Paul's intent becomes clearer in 2:8 with the phrase "even death upon the cross." It is widely accepted that this phrase is a Pauline addition to the hymn because it interrupts the flow of the poetry. The phrase serves to further define the type of death to which Jesus was obedient. Perhaps Paul was contemplating his own death (1:20). The use of "death upon a cross" seems to emphasize the example of humility and obedience of Jesus. For both Romans and Jews, death upon a cross was the most humiliating and revolting form of capital punishment.⁴ Paul may not only be emphasizing the extent to which Christ went in obedience and humility, but also the extent to which Paul and the Philippians may have to go to follow the example of Jesus.

II. THE HYMN

The hymn is best understood within the framework of "Adam Christology."⁵ Though the hymn is obviously about Christ, it defines him and his choices against the backdrop of Adam's failure. The hymn presupposes Adam's fateful choice, his desire to "be like God," his failure, and his downfall. Jesus is the second Adam. Where the first Adam failed, the second Adam is victorious. Where the first Adam sought his own interests, the second Adam remained obedient to the point of death. This Adam Christology is a feature of Paul's writings (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:20-28) and of early Christianity. For example, the temptation stories in Matthew and Luke have in their background the temptation of Adam in Genesis. Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Adam. Adam's ancestry is listed as the "son of God." It is interesting that Luke's genealogy of Jesus, ending with Adam, is immediately followed with the temptation story. For the early church, the significance of Jesus was understood, at least in part, in light of the downfall of Adam.

"Who, though he was in the form of God" (2:6). What does it mean to be in the "form of God"? Is it the same as Adam being in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:27)? As mentioned above the Greek word for form, *morphe*, occurs in the NT only here and in Mark 16:12. It has,

⁴ Martin, 31-32.

⁵ Dunn observes, "It seems to me that Phil. 2:6-11 is best understood as an expression of Adam Christology, one of the fullest expressions that we still possess. We have already seen how widespread was this Adam Christology in the period before Paul wrote his letters — a fact not usually appreciated by those who offer alternative exegesis of the hymn" (*Christology in the Making*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980, 114-115).

consequently, been difficult to draw any conclusions based solely upon the NT usage. The question has been and continues to be “Is the form of God equivalent to the image of God?” In Genesis 2:7, the LXX translates the Hebrew word for image into the Greek *eikon*. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15 Christ is called the *eikon* of God, not the *morphe* of God. Nevertheless, R. P. Martin concludes that *morphe* and *eikon* are equivalent terms that are used interchangeably in the LXX.⁶ Martin adds, “It is more in keeping with the apostle’s essentially Hebraic outlook to seek the interpretation of the phrase in the language of the O.T. This is done in the suggested equation of *morphe* and *eikon*.”⁷ James Dunn observes that “it has long been recognized that *morphe* (form) and *eikon* (image) are near synonyms.”⁸ Dunn further comments, “Since the thought is dominated by the Adam/Christ parallel and contrast, individual expressions must be understood within that context. The terms used in the hymn do not have an independent value; their sense is determined by their role within Adam Christology.”⁹ The conclusion is that the phrase “form of God” is equivalent to “image of God.” Jesus is the second Adam created in the image of God as Adam was. As Adam, Jesus is in an esteemed position. Like Adam, Jesus was faced with a choice: seek his own interests or God’s; obey or rebel.

“Did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped” (2:6, NASB). The thing to be grasped (“something to be exploited,” NRSV) is translated from the Greek *harpagmos*. Its exact meaning is an issue for perennial debate since the word is found only here in the NT. The meaning of *harpagmos* is understood in either of two ways. On the one hand, Jesus was tempted to hold tightly to that which he already possessed — namely, equality with God. On the other hand Jesus was

⁶ R. P. Martin, “*Morphe* in Philippians 2:6,” *Expository Times*, Vol. 70, no. 6, March 1959, 183-184.

⁷ Martin, 17. It might be helpful to consider Martin’s words in their larger context: “Earlier writers viewed the term (*morphe*) through the spectacles of Greek philosophy and reached conclusions that here was a word which expressed the metaphysical notion of ‘*ousia*’ as an equivalent of deity. The exact wording ‘*in morphe Theou*’ and the more likely background of the apostle’s thought world of the O.T. and Hellenistic Judaism would support a more profitable line of approach. Instead of the parallels to be found in Aristotle’s highly formal statements about *morphe*, it is more in keeping with the apostle’s essentially Hebraic outlook to seek an interpretation of the phrase in the language of the O.T. This is done in the suggested equation of *morphe* and *eikon*.”

⁸ Dunn, 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

tempted to grasp/seize what he did not already possess. In keeping with the Adam Christology inherent within the hymn, the latter definition seems more appropriate. The temptation to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:5 was, in part, “you will be like God.” Adam sought to grasp equality with God. Martin, commenting on the wording of Philippians 2:6, writes, “This unusual wording suggests that Paul has also in view the instance and example of another person who did count equality with God as a desirable thing, and from a favored position did aspire to his own glory.”¹⁰ In contrast to Adam’s selfish choice, Jesus did not seek to usurp God’s authority.

Charles Talbert arranges the hymn in four strophes of three lines each. Talbert finds parallels between the first two strophes.¹¹ It will be helpful for our discussion to reproduce below the first two strophes according to Talbert’s arrangement:

who, though he was in the form of God
did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped
but emptied himself
taking the form of a slave

being in human likeness
and being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death

It is Talbert’s contention that the first two strophes are parallel and that both strophes are statements about Jesus’ earthly life and not about pre-existence.¹² For Talbert, the first lines of each strophe are parallel statements: “in the form of God” and “in human likeness.” Talbert forges the link between these two seemingly contradictory statements with Genesis 5:1-3.¹³ In Genesis 5:1, God is said to have created human beings in the “likeness of God.” In Genesis 5:3, Adam became the father of a “son in his likeness and image.” To be in the “form of God” (image of

¹⁰ Martin, 22.

¹¹ C. H. Talbert, “The Problem of Pre-existence in Philippians 2:6-11,” *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 86, 1970, 148.

¹² *Ibid.*, 148, 153. Talbert further comments, “Both (strophes) are concerned with the decision of Jesus to be God’s servant rather than to repeat the tragedy of Adam and his sons” (153).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

God) is then roughly equivalent to being in the “likeness of men.”¹⁴ The further parallels in this arrangement are more obvious: “he humbled himself”/“he emptied himself”¹⁵ and “taking the form of a slave”/“became obedient to the point of death.” There may be a simpler solution to understand the meaning of “being in human likeness” or “taking the form of a slave.” Perhaps, in keeping with the Adam Christology, these phrases are descriptions of what Adam and his progeny became as a result of that fateful choice. Adam became a slave to corruption and sin. Though Christ was found in the form of God (*en morphe Theou*) he took on the form of a slave (*morphe doulou*). Jesus, though born in a favored and esteemed position, shared the lot of humankind (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:4). While Adam fell from a favored position through selfish and disobedient action, Jesus deliberately chose the position of a servant and humbled himself, giving up what was rightfully his as one born in the image of God. Though the hymn speaks of a specific event in the life of Jesus, obedience to the point of death on the cross, the hymn may, in fact, be a description of the whole character of Jesus’ life and ministry — selflessness, obedience, and humility. This is all in contrast to the actions of the first Adam. What takes place in the hymn does not occur “beyond history” in some preexistent or eternal state. It takes place “within history,” in the life of a man born in the likeness of Adam, born in a favored position, born in the image of God, who deliberately chose to share the state of the lowly, who purposely humbled himself, and who obeyed his God even to the point of death.

Yet the hymn does not concern itself only with the themes of humility, obedience, and sacrifice. Because Jesus obeyed to the point of death, “therefore, God also highly exalted him.” This is especially significant for Paul’s readers and, I suspect, Paul himself. Jesus’ example demonstrates that humility, obedience to God, suffering on behalf of others, and sacrifice lead to exaltation. *The very power of the hymn is in the Philippians’ ability to identify with it.* A hymn regarding a complicated metaphysical confession would not be as effective in this context as one

¹⁴ Dunn writes, “Talbert’s own analysis results in a very unbalanced set of four strophes. Where basic movement is sufficiently clear we should beware of making an exegesis dependent on a particular and controversial construction of form” (310, footnote 65).

¹⁵ “This phrase, attested nowhere else in Greek, is grammatically harsh. It is explicable, however, if understood as an exact rendering of the Hebrew . . . ‘poured out his nephesh’ in Isaiah 53:12. If so, then the phrase refers to the servant’s surrender of life” (Talbert, 152).

which encouraged humility and obedience in the face of tough choices and temptations. This hymn is a story of a man who chose to obey God even if that choice led to death. This humility led to exaltation. The Philippians are called to model this behavior. Paul introduces the hymn with these words: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” The message is clear: Obedience and humility lead to exaltation. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10-11, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Notice the connection between sufferings/death and the hope of resurrection. Paul hoped to share in Christ’s exaltation. Listen to Philippians 3:21: “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” The Philippians are invited to follow the steps of Christ. Those who humble themselves will be exalted. That exaltation is defined by Paul as the resurrection.

Jesus, as a result of being exalted by God, has regained what Adam had lost. In Genesis 1:28 God told Adam, “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Though in a different order, this is in agreement with the threefold rule of Christ in Philippians 2:10: “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

Genesis 1:28	Philippians 2:10
fish of the sea	under the earth
birds of the air	in heaven
every living thing that	on earth
moves upon the earth	

The theme of dominion and this threefold rulership are found also in Psalm 8:4-8:

What are human beings that you are mindful of them . . . Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea.

What was lost by Adam as a result of his attempted grab for power was regained by Christ through obedience and humility. What was intended for Adam and human beings is realized in Christ.

The crowning moment of this “super-exaltation” of Christ is the grand confession of all creation: “Jesus Christ is Lord!” However, the text adds that all of this praise and adulation of the Christ is “to the glory of God the Father.” Even in exaltation, the themes of humility and obedience continue. First Corinthians 15 contains a similar account of the exaltation of Christ. Christ is portrayed as the second Adam: “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:22). Paul continues, “God has put all things in subjection under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:27). Though Christ is exalted, Paul adds:

But when it says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:27b-28).

Though Christ is highly exalted, Paul makes it clear that Christ remains subject to God. Adam failed to obey and he lost it all. Jesus remained obedient to God and gained it all.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). The purpose in Paul’s use of the hymn is to hold up the example of Christ’s humility and obedience. This was in contrast to Adam’s desire to be equal with God. Adam was selfish. Christ was selfless. Adam failed. Christ was victorious. Humility and obedience in the service of Christ lead to exaltation. If you share in the sufferings of Christ, you will also share in his glory.