The Passage

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. 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 should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11 NRSV).

Touto froneite en umin o kai en Cristw Ihsou, o" en morfh qeou uparcwn ouc arpagmon hghsato to einai isa qew, alla eauton ekenwsen morfhn doulou labwn, en omoiwmati anqrwpwn genomeno": kai schmati eureqei" w" anqrwpo" etapeinwsen eauton genomeno" uphkoo" mecri qanatou, qanatou de staurou. dio kai o qeo" auton uperuywsen kai ecarisato autw to onoma to uper pan onoma, ina en tw onomati Ihsou pan gonu kamyh epouraniwn kai epigeiwn kai katacqoniwn kai pasa glwssa exomologhshtai oti kurio" Ihsou" Cristo" ei" doxan qeou patro" (Phil 2:5-11 GNT).

Philippians 2:5-11 has been a source of many theological and literary debates. It is undoubtedly one of the most eloquent summations of the Christian view of Jesus. Yet, at the same time, the seemingly ambiguous wordings found in the passage have caused numerous controversies. The varied interpretations of the passage have been influential in the development of Gnostic and kenotic Christology. Additionally, the Jehovah's Witnesses have proposed alternate translations that challenge traditional orthodox, evangelical theology. Of concern to the theologian are four phrases: 1) "though he was in the form of God," 2) he "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited," 3) "he emptied himself," and 4) "taking the form of a slave." These four phrases affect our understanding of the person of Christ and the nature of the incarnation. The concern is whether these verses affirm the deity of Christ, both in the preincarnate and incarnate states, and whether they affirm that Christ is fully human.

Context, Form and Purpose

Studying a passage in isolation can lead to incorrect conclusions. As such, before the problem phrases of the passage can be discussed, it is of the utmost importance to briefly explore the context in which it appears, its form and then in consideration of these two, its purpose.

The passage is found in the Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. The theme of the letter is to encourage the church of Philippi in persistence and perseverance (Phil 1:27-28a). In order to support this theme, the Apostle Paul appeals to the example of Christ. Paul argues that Jesus' examples of humility and self-sacrificial service are fundamental to spiritual growth (Phil 2:1-18). The Apostle then provides his own testimony of perseverance as a warning against being sidetracked and as encouragement for the church (Phil 3). Comments urging the Philippians to resolve divisions, to rejoice in all things and to think as well as do the things of God follow Paul's testimony (Phil 4:1-9). Paul's closing comments are a word of thanks for the financial support the church has provided him (Phil 4:10-20).

Philippians 2:5-11 differs from the rest of the letter in its poetic characteristics (particularly evident in vv. 6-8). For this reason, F.F. Bruce, Gerald Hawthorne and others refer to

the passage as the Christ hymn. The exact strophic arrangement and whether vv. 9-11 are even poetic in nature are hotly debated topics. Gordon Fee, for instance, points out that vv. 9-11 have a narrative character, with argumentative wordings that suggest the passage may not be a hymn (193). In addition, the passage follows a descent-ascent motif, describing first the humiliation and then the exaltation of Jesus Christ. There also appears to be a strong connection with the fourth servant song of Isaiah and with Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet:

The Fourth Servant Song Isaiah 52:13-15, 53	**The Washing of the Disciples' Feet John 13:3-17**	**Philippians 2:5-11**
"And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"	"he had come from God and was going to God"	". . . though he was in the form of God"
"he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"	". . . got up from the table, took off his outer robe"	". . . did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself"
"He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity" ". . . because he poured out himself to death"	" . . . tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him"	" . . . taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."
"Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong"	"After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table"	"Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name"
"See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high." " . . . through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge." "The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities."	"You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right for that is what I am"	". . . at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"

Note. Adapted from *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (78).

These parallels strongly suggest that the passage had a theological or soteriological purpose in the early church. In fact, as a summation of basic Christian doctrine, the passage was likely an early confession or creed rather than a hymn.[1]

In light of its context and its form, the purpose of the passage is twofold. First, the Apostle Paul is proclaiming Jesus Christ as the greatest example of persistence and perseverance. The passage, therefore, was meant to encourage the Philippians in their course with the assured hope that they would "be conformed to the body of [Christ's] glory" (Phil 3:21). The second purpose of the passage would have been to remind the Philippians of their confession of faith. When Paul wrote to churches facing opposition and struggle, Paul commonly sought to bring them up again by reaffirming their earlier convictions.[2] As such, the Apostle Paul's intent for the passage was likely to say, "Look, I know you are facing hard times but remember that old creed, your statement of faith—it was true, so remember it and strive to live it."

The Problem Phrases

(1) though he was in the form of God, morfh *(morphe)*

The phrase "though he was in the form of God" relates to the divinity or deity of Christ. The lack of an outright statement declaring that Christ is qeou and the relatively rare usage of the word morfh somewhat obscures the meaning of the passage. Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, would argue that this phrase only suggests that Jesus Christ's pre-existence was in spirit, with heavenly splendour, and therefore, he was only in appearance similar to God. They would further clarify that the phrase does not imply that Jesus Christ is Almighty God. Yet, this emphasis on the external appearance fails on three counts:

[1] Gerald A. Hawthorne, in his commentary on Philippians, agrees that Philippians 2:5-11 "may have been originally composed for christological or soteriological reasons" (79). He argues, however, that its appearance in this letter is primarily for ethical purposes. Notwithstanding the evidence for this position, the purpose of this paper is to consider the theological implications of the passage and therefore I am not too concerned with its ethical purposes.

[2] For another example of this technique see the Letter of Paul to the Colossians. Ascetic and ritualistic issues were threatening the church at Colossae. Therefore, in Colossians 1:15-20, the Apostle Paul writes a creed that affirms the Christian message. This passage and the Christ creed strongly suggest that early churches had creedal statements of faith that Paul called upon to support his arguments and admonish his audience. Whether Paul developed these creeds when he founded the churches or whether they are quotations is another consideration.

1. The Apostle Paul could have used the word schma had he intended to say that Jesus Christ was only similar to God in appearance. As opposed to morfh, schma can not refer to anything but external appearances.
2. The word morfh also appears in v.7 of the passage. The second occurrence is antithetical to the first; morfh qeou stands in contrast to morfhn doulou. Therefore, if we are to interpret the first occurrence as pertaining to external appearance, the second occurrence should also refer to external appearance. Yet, it is obvious that Paul did not mean that Jesus Christ had the external appearance of a slave but rather, Paul shows in v.8 that Jesus Christ acted as a slave. The context then demands that morfh refers to the intrinsic or essential qualities of a thing—in this case, Jesus Christ was in very nature God and slave.
3. Though the Apostle Paul does not use the word morfh in any other writings, he does use "cognate forms of the root morf-" in Romans 2:20 and 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 4:19, Philippians 3:10 and 3:21 and 2 Timothy 3:5. In each instance, the cognate form implies participation in the character or nature of something (O'Brien 207).

It is clear then that this phrase suggests that Jesus Christ shared in or possessed divine qualities of God. In the *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Gerald Hawthorne agrees that en morfh qeou assumes that Christ was equal to God:

> This somewhat enigmatic expression, then, appears to be a cautious, hidden way for the author to say that Christ was God, possessed of the very nature of God, without employing these exact words (84, *parenthetical citation removed*).

Moreover, in consideration of the poetic form of the passage and the use of antithetical parallelism, the wording, as it appears, has a practical purpose. The phrase affirms the deity of Christ while maintaining a rhythmic flow.[3]

[3] If this is correct, it must be assumed that the church of Philippi already believed in the divine Christ and therefore, would have clearly understood this passage as refering to His deity.

(2) he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited*, arpagmon (harpagmos)*

Any interpretation of the phrase "[he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" relies heavily on the interpretation of the previously discussed phrase, "though he was in the form of God." There are three dominant interpretations of this phrase:

1. Jesus Christ, in his pre-existent state, was not equal to God and as such, this phrase declares that he did not desire or seek equality with God. Jehovah's Witnesses and liberal theologians that would obviously deny the deity of Christ support this view. In this case, arpagmon means "the act of seizing, robbery" (Strong). The passage would read similar to the translation found in *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, "although he was existing in God's form, gave no consideration to a seizure, namely, that he should be equal to God." Given the interpretation of "though he was in the form of God," however, this view is untenable and more importantly, not supported by the larger context of the whole Bible.
2. Jesus Christ, in his pre-existent state, was God and as such, this phrase declares that he could have claimed the rights of deity but instead he did not use it to his own advantage. This view is likely the most common in the evangelical tradition. This interpretation is the basis for the translation of phrase quoted in the heading. In this case, arpagmon means "a thing to be seized upon or to be held fast, retained" (Strong). This interpretation of the word arpagmon, however, is suspect.
3. Jesus Christ, in his pre-existent state, was God and as such, this phrase declares that he did not consider the true nature of deity to be selfish but instead, self-sacrificing. This view affirms the prevalent meaning of arpagmon as well as the deity of Christ. Gerald Hawthorne, however, points out that this view demands an alternate translation of the preceding phrase. It should read, "precisely because he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God grounds for grasping" (75). This alternate translation is tenable and even preferable. Hawthorne notes that the participial phrase at the

beginning of v.6 should be causative not concessive. Given the ethical context of the entire passage, this affirmation of Christ's servant attitude fits perfectly, particularly in light of vv.3-4. The Apostle Paul is stating that a Christian should serve because it is an attribute, a character trait of God; servanthood is part of being like Christ.

(3) he emptied himself, *ekenwsen (ekenosen)*

The first two problem phrases apply to the divine nature of Christ; the last two phrases deal with the incarnation, or more specifically, the nature of Christ's humanity. The phrase "he emptied himself" is, without doubt, one of the most curious statements made by the Apostle Paul about Jesus Christ. The passage gives almost no indication of what Christ emptied himself of. This difficulty gave rise to kenotic Christology (aka "The Kenosis Theory"). Kenotic Christology receives its name from the transliteration of the Greek ekenwsen and argues that Christ emptied himself of a divine quality. The specific divine quality that Christ gave up is hotly debated.[4]

The problem with kenotic Christology, however, is that if Christ gave up any divine quality, could He still be fully God, equal to the Father? Moreover, can such a view really be supported in light of passages that suggest Jesus Christ still possessed divine attributes (eternality, Jn 17:5; omnipresence, Mt 18:20, 28:20; omnipotence, Heb 1:3; omniscience, Mt 9:4) and divine prerogatives (forgiveness of sins, Mt 9:2, Lk 7:47; judgment, Jn 5:22; power over the dead, Jn 5:25, 11:25)? John Calvin argues that the Apostle Paul only claims that Jesus Christ gave up the outward appearance of deity:

> The kingdom of God assuredly had no beginning, and will have no end: but because he was hid under a humble clothing of flesh, and took upon himself the form of a servant, and humbled himself (Phil. 2:8), and, laying aside the insignia of majesty, became obedient to the Father; and after undergoing this subjection was at length crowned with glory and honour (Heb. 2:7), and exalted to supreme authority, that at his name every knee should bow (Phil. 2:10); so at the end he will subject to the Father both the name and the crown of glory, and

> whatever he received of the Father, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28) (Calvin).

This view tends to fit the passage, particularly the contrast between morfh qeou and morfhn doulou. Yet, this position is only part of the solution.

The parallel between the fourth servant song and this passage, as noted earlier, provides further insight into the phrase. The verb form of the word ekenwsen found in this passage can mean "to pour out" (Hawthorne 85). In this case, the parallel Isaianic phrase "he poured out himself unto death" provides a means for understanding this phrase. The Apostle Paul is not particularly concerned with whether or not Jesus gave up divine qualities rather he is concerned with the sacrifice Jesus made. Jesus selflessly poured out the qualities of his nature upon all people; he became a servant "so that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:10; cf. 2 Cor 8:9, Eph 1:23, 1 Jn 3:16). This interpretation fits the context on three counts: 1) the phrase then affirms the call to humility and service in vv.3-4, 2) the phrase provides a counter point to the previous phrase; that is, instead of taking or grasping, Jesus gives, and 3) the following phrases become an explanation of how "he emptied himself" (i.e. by taking the form of a slave, being humble and obedient).

***(4) taking the form of a slave**, morfh (morphe)*

The previously discussed phrases show that Jesus Christ was God in his preincarnate state, shared equality with God and because he was in very nature God, he was not selfish but selfless. And therefore, in the incarnation, Jesus Christ takes "the morfh of a slave" and is "born in omoiwmati." Yet, here again, problems arise with the Apostle Paul's choice of words.

This is the second appearance of the word morfh and as noted in the previous case, it does not refer to outward appearance in this context but rather intrinsic qualities. As such, Jesus Christ in the incarnate state became in very nature a slave. The phrase even seems to recall Christ's role as the suffering servant. The parallels between the entire passage and the fourth servant song as well as the more specific Isaianic parallel in the preceeding phrase provide a

[4] See *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* by H. Wayne House, pages 57 and 58, for a brief presentation of the

tantalizing possibility that the Apostle Paul is declaring that Jesus Christ is the Servant of the Lord.[5] The lack of a definite article (i.e. the slave instead of a slave), however, casts doubt on this view. Yet, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Apostle Paul and the church of Philippi recognized Christ's servanthood as a fullfillment of the Isaianic servant songs and would have had this background in view (Fee 212). Moreover, the phrase also provides an essential statement for the aforementioned parallel with John 13:3-7 and builds on the concept of God's selfless nature as revealed in v.6:

> [The phrase] does not mean that he *exchanged* the nature (or form) of God for the nature (or form) of a servant: it means he displayed the nature (or form) of God *in* the nature (or form) of a servant . . . It was in full awareness of his divine origin and destiny, in full awareness of the authority conferred on him by the Father, that Jesus washed his disciples' feet and dried them with the towel he had tied round his waist (Bruce 46).

In light of the Isaianic and Johannine parallels, it is clear that the Apostle Paul was stating that Jesus Christ became in very nature a slave and, moreover, he did so in order reveal God's nature.

Conclusion

The problem phrases then are crucial statements concerning the nature of Christ; that is, Jesus Christ is God and Jesus is fully human. These statements, in the context of the entire passage, countered the heresies of Docetists and Gnostics, who denied Christ's humanity, and the heresies of those teachers who denied Christ's divinity. These phrases strongly suggest that Philippians 2:5-11 was a creed and thereby give us insight into the initial purpose that the creed may have had outside of the context of this letter. The creed likely had three purposes: 1) to affirm the incarnation—a Hypostatic union of God and man, and 2) to remind early Christians that Christ was the fulfilment of Old Testament promises (hence, the Isaianic parallel) and, 3) to serve as an outline of Christ's message, His sacrifice (hence the Johannine parallel) and His

"traditional kenotic theories."

[5] Numerous theologians have taken this view, most notably H.W. Robinson, L. Cerfaux, R. P. Martin, J. Jeremias and others. See O'Brien 220, 268-271 for the essential arguments.

exaltation. By including this creed then, the Apostle Paul equipped the Philippians for the defence of the gospel.

In the larger context of the letter, however, the phrases are part of a passage that makes a crucial statement concerning the attitude of Christ; that is, Jesus Christ, as God or as God-man, possessed a spirit of humility and a heart for service. The Apostle Paul's primary purpose for including this creed in his letter is to challenge the Philippians to "carry the cross and follow" the Lord Jesus Christ (Lk 14:27). The Philippians are called to "look not to [their] own interests, but to the interest of others" and in so doing, share in "the compassion of Christ Jesus" and "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:4, 1:8, 3:14). They are further challenged to live as Christ did and to "be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Phil 2:15). The Apostle Paul also illustrates in this creed that the faithfulness and obedience to which they have been called will bear fruit—just as Christ was exalted by the Father, so also is the believer given citizenship in heaven, transformed and conformed to the image of Christ Jesus (Phil 2:19-21).

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