

The Pre-Existent Christ as the Perfect Model of Servanthood
An Interpretive Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11

In fulfillment of the course
Biblical Hermeneutics
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Thesis: St. Paul in Philippians 2:5-11 Paul urges the saints, overseers, and deacons at Phillipi to look at Christ, the perfect exemplary as to how we should live amongst one another. To accomplish this, he shows Christ as the one who had (and has) equality with God, but chose to become human, dying the most degrading and humiliating of deaths. He then shows that God, his Father, took action by exalting him and gracing him with the divine name, that which is above all others, and that to him, *all* will bow before and *all* confess as Lord.

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Introduction

Philippians 2:6-11 has been one of the most argued over set of verses by biblical scholars in the past 100 years. Verse 2:6 is key in understanding who Christ was prior to incarnation; vv. 2:7-8 are foundational in understanding what he did in becoming Jesus of Nazareth; while vv. 2:9-11 are foundational in understanding who Jesus is today as *Kyrios Christos*.

Scholars such as Jimmy Dunn, on one extreme, have argued that 2:6-8 speaks of a purely adamic figure;¹ in the median, Tom Wright² and Michael Gorman have argued it represents both an adamic figure and the pre-existent Christ;³ and to the other extreme, Gordon Fee⁴ and Richard Bauckham⁵ have argued that it is a strictly pre-existent Christ figure that Paul is portraying.

Often scholars argue that the key to understanding this passage lay is within the historical background of the text. These scholars say historical motifs, such as the reality and ideology of slavery, the Roman ideology of the pursuit of honor, and the theology and practice of the imperial cult, play important background roles in understanding the text.⁶ To the contrary, instead of imposing historical motifs onto the text, scholars such as Larry Hurtado argue to deduce the Christological motif (which is arguably needed to understand Pauline theology) that is in the text first, then allow the historical background motifs to fit as puzzle pieces where they ought.⁷

Another topic of debate regarding this passage is one of literary genre. What is this text we are looking into? Is it a pre-Pauline hymn as forcefully and thoroughly argued by Ralph P.

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 120.

² N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 59-61.

³ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 13-16.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 203-10.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 203-5.

⁶ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*, 15.

⁷ Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 87.

Martin?⁸ Or, is it merely Pauline exalted prose, as Gordon Fee argues?⁹ Some, but not much time, will be spent talking on this as well.

Though I have only talked about vv. 6-11 in particular, this paper is focused on addressing the prior verse as well; thus, making the paper focus on vv. 5-11. The purposes I have for including verse 5 is so that we can have a contextual basis and deduce contemporary application from this set of verses.

My goal in this paper is to show three things: 1) Paul's model for teaching is Christ, 2) the nature of the God Paul is talking about, and 3) the contemporary application for the incarnate body of Christ.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.¹⁰ -
Philippians 2:5-11

Historical Analysis

As a precursor to the brunt of this paper, I ought to give my historical epistemological bias upfront. I am highly skeptical when it comes to what we can know with *absolute* certainty,

⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997), 24-41.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 40-43.

¹⁰ All quoted verses from Bible, will be taken from the New International 2011 edition.

especially from a document that dates back into the first century A.D. Though I am critical in my approach, I do not think for a moment that we are lost in some kind of post-modern abyss—not being able to discern any truth about the past whatsoever. Thus, I come to this paper with a historical epistemological view termed by the eminent New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright. He calls this historical critical realism.¹¹ With this said, when I speak of historical matters, I will rarely say “we know for sure” or “it is absolutely certain”; rather, when speaking of historical matters, I will more or less speak in probabilities such as, “it *seems* more than evident”. Now to Philippians:

Philippians, by the good majority of contemporary scholarship is understood to have been written around A.D. 53 (if from Ephesus), or A.D. 62 (if from Rome), by Paul with Timothy (possibly as his amanuensis).¹² For the purpose of this paper, we will assume the latter of the two dates.

What is Philippians? When coming upon the question of literary genre in the ancient Greco-Roman world, one has quite a wealth of letters to sift through to identify what it relates with. Since space is limited, I will not go into great depth about this, but will summarize Gordon Fee on this point. Fee argues that it shares most resemblance with ancient Greco-Roman letters of friendship.¹³ The format of these letters are as followed (corresponding to Philippians in brackets):

1. The address and greeting [1:1-2]
2. Prayer for the recipients [1:3-11]

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God)*, 1st North American ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1992), 29-119.

¹² Frank Thielman, ed., *Romans to Philemon*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 3 of *Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 343.

¹³Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 2-3

3. Reassurance about the sender (= “my affairs”) [1:12-26]
4. Request for reassurance about the recipients (= “your affairs”) [1:27-2:18; 3:1-4:3]
5. Information about movements of intermediaries [2:19-30]
6. Exchange of greetings with third parties [4:21-22]
7. Closing wish for health [4:23]¹⁴

Thus, he concludes by stating: “In light of the foregoing, Philippians is rightly called “a hortatory letter of friendship. The marks of the ‘letter of friendship’ are everywhere.”¹⁵

To be relevant to our topic discussion, I will ignore the far and few in between radical fringe scholars who assume that this book is not Pauline. Though the grand majority of scholars assume this book is Pauline, almost that entire grand majority assume the Philippians 2:6-11 passage to have pre-Pauline origins by arguing it is a hymn, and therefore not written by Paul. Because of this, scholars have tried to place historio-cultural backdrops behind this text, in order to truly understand how Paul was using it. Though I briefly noted a few of the historical motifs proposed above, I will give an exhaustive list of them: Heterodox Judaism (Lohmeyer), Iranian myth of the Heavenly Redeemer (Beare), Pre-Christian Hellenistic Gnosticism (Käsemann), Jewish Gnosticism (J.A. Sanders), Old Testament Servant motif (Coppens, Moule, Strimple), Genesis Adamic theme (Murphy-O’Connor, Dunn), and Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom (Georgi).¹⁶ Fee suggests that the very diversity of proposals suggest the very futility and irrelevance of this exercise.¹⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that Philippians 2:6-11 is not pre-Pauline in origins, not a hymn, and though containing what seems like exalted, perhaps even relatively

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 12.

¹⁶Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁷Ibid.

poetic prose, it still missing the mark of being Hebrew Semitic hymnody. For reasons on this see the footnote below.¹⁸

Contextual Analysis

The occasion that caused Paul to write to the believers in Philippi has evoked a considerable amount of discussion.¹⁹ As mentioned above, this letter is a hortatory letter of friendship. So what this letter does not entail is rebuke, but rather exhortation.

What is understandable from the text is that Paul had a very friendly relationship with the Philippians. Moreover, we also see that the believers in Philippi were his benefactors that contributed more than once to His ministry.²⁰ So, even though Paul does not mention the gift the Philippians graced him with until the end of the book (vv. 4:10-20) (Paul acknowledged just before the final greetings the gift, this way the final words they hear will be that of gratitude, reciprocity, and doxology),²¹ this is believed to be one of the main purposes for writing this letter. An additional reason for the causation of this letter is the commendation of Epaphroditus, who as the text says will be the one bringing it back to his home.²² Indeed, it seems that the return of Epaphroditus is probably the primary reason for writing at this time.²³ Another reason for Paul writing this letter is to update them on his own situation, and by doing so, encourage

¹⁸ Daniel Levy, "Philippians 2:6-11 a Pre-Pauline Hymn? I Thought So..." Christ, My Redeemer, entry posted March 2, 2011, <http://christmyredeemer.wordpress.com/2011/03/02/philippians-25-11-a-pre-pauline-hymn-i-thought-so/> (accessed April 3, 2011).

¹⁹ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to Philippians* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 33.

²⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to Philippians*. 33.

²¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. 39.

²² Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to Philippians*. 33.

²³ *Ibid.*

them in their own, always with Christ at the forefront and example. As Ben Witherington III says, this letter is “more of a progress-oriented letter than a problem-solving letter.”²⁴ Therefore, it seems with this in mind, Paul discusses their need for Christian unity and having the same attitude as Christ (2:1-5); the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3); the danger of their opponents (3:2-11); and the enemies of the cross (3:18-19).²⁵

The general literary context of 2:5-11 includes a “therefore” in 2:1 and another in 2:12. Prior to the first “therefore”, Paul speaks of his own suffering. This included imprisonment and others preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry due to selfish ambition (vv. 12- 15). In 1:30 he mentions that as believers, the Philippians will not just believe in Christ, but also suffer for Him, since they are going through the same struggle Paul had prior and was currently going through. Though it is not possible to go into detail, Paul is not suggesting that their circumstances were identical with his, as if they were in prison, but rather the very same on a theological basis.²⁶

Paul, in between these two “therefore” clauses gives the Philippians an exhortation to be like-minded and to be of one spirit, to do nothing out of wrong motive, but rather to be humble by considering others better than one’s own self (vv.1-5).

Beginning with verse 6, we see the foundation to Paul’s exhortation of having a mindset the same as Christ Jesus (which is connected with vv.1-4). He then (in my opinion) writes one of the most beautiful pieces of literature that sums up who Jesus is, prior to being a man, as a man on earth, and as a resurrected man, who is exalted to the highest place (vv. 6-11).

²⁴ Ben Witherington, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians (Nt In Context Commentaries)* (North Darthmouth: Trinity Press Int'l, 1994), 41.

²⁵ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to Philippians*. 33.

²⁶ Peter T O'Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians (NIGTC): A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press, 1991), 162.

Verse 12 begins with the second “therefore” (connected with exhortation in vv.1-4), which are both solidified by the foundational example of Christ Jesus in vv. 6-11.

In the letter to the Philippians, I find it safe to say that woven all throughout, a consistent theme of being like Christ is present. Thus, I think to understand Philippians, vv. 6-11 are pertinent in order to understand the book as a whole. For Paul, so it seems in this letter (I would moreover argue not only this letter, but his entire theology as understood through his Christology), Christ did not *only* die for us, but was moreover the only truly human one reflecting what God is exactly like and in his actions, taught us how to live (a thought that will be explored later).

Literary and Theological Analysis

5 *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

Philippians 2:5 has caused a considerable amount of debate and scholarly discussion. The clause “which [was] also in Christ Jesus,” needs a verb supplied. So the question being begged, is whether or not “the appeal [is] to Christ’s earthly conduct or to his act of transcendental significance.”²⁷ Instead of elaborating in much length, I will briefly mention what I think is crucial in order to understand this passage. The key, in my opinion, is to not read the passage in a vacuum, as it seems some have done. Rather, it would make sense that Paul is either commanding or exhorting (vv. 2-4) the Philippians, and after doing so, providing a foundation, reasoning, or perhaps apologia for doing what he says. For a faithful Jew like Paul, he understands what it means to be the *imago dei* and not only this, but what it means to be in covenantal relationship; “We are to be the ones reflecting who God is into the world!” I can hear

²⁷ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians, Revised Edition (Word Biblical Commentary, Revised & Expanded ed., vol. 43)* (Colombia: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 106.

Paul exclaim. So as Paul often does in his corpus, he uses Christ as the exemplary model to follow. Thus, it is only logical to assume that Paul, as a good overseer, is making this relevant, and not telling us literally to imitate Christ, for that would be impossible.

It would seem counter-intuitive for a Jew like Paul to think so crass and literal about the narrative we see in vv. 6-11. It would be even more nonsensical to assume he subscribes to a highly anthropocentric theology that includes us being in God's nature, us sharing equality with Him, us later being exalted to the highest place, us given the tetragrammaton, and to be expectantly waiting for all to confess us (Christians) as Lord. Therefore, it is crucial to realize that Paul is speaking in analogous language. As Christ acted, so should the Christians; this is what philosophers call the *imitatio dei*. Take upon you the same *mindset*, is what Paul is exhorting. Paul is showing through and through that Christ acted in ultimate humility. Christ, who in very nature is God, *made* Himself nothing, *took* the nature of a servant, and He Himself accepted the ultimate degradation by *becoming obedient* by accepting death upon cross. Through and through, no one forced Christ to do this; it was His choice. Thus, Paul in effect is saying, "the attitude of mind I have been urging on you is exactly that of God himself, as it has been spelled out in the incarnation."²⁸

2:5 serves as a base of transition, or inextricable link between verses 2:1-4 and 2:6-11.²⁹ Therefore, verse 5 points back to vv. 1-4 and looks ahead to vv. 6-11. The phrase Paul uses, "In you" is very comfortably double entendre. It primarily is to be used when referencing community, but the only possible way for this to happen, is if they, one by one, heed Paul's

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians* (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series) (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 92.

²⁹ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to Philippians*. 121.

exhortation in v. 4.³⁰ When each one does this, the mindset is no longer separated, far and few in-between, but familial, bodily, communal, and “with one another”.

After this, Paul “launches into [the] narrative about Christ that is at once one of the most exalted, most beloved, and most discussed and debated passages in the Pauline corpus.”³¹ One more thing to note is this: in this paper I will assume this piece of literature to be narrative in genre, a narrative that is V like in structure, which includes three scenes. The first two are in a successive downward fashion and the last is successively upward. Jesus successively humbled Himself by accepting the ultimate degradation, and then the Father successively exalted Him. The first scene is before the *Logos* became flesh. The second scene discusses when He became flesh. And the third scene is post degradation; it is the scene with the One who was exalted to the highest place, given the name above every name, and eschatologically speaking, the one to whom every knee will bow and tongue confess as Lord.

6-7 *“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”*

6 At the first part of the V, Paul talks about Jesus eternally coexisting with God before having flesh. The implications of this are absolutely stunning when it comes to the development of a Pauline Christology (something I will flesh out later).

Paul begins with the pronoun “Who,” which “Christ Jesus” is the antecedent of in the prior verse. So it is abundantly clear that Paul, when saying “Who,” is referring to the historical

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. 192.

Jesus of Nazareth, since there is no historical evidence that in the first century, there was one referred to as Christos (with the proper name of Jesus).

He then continues by saying “being in very nature [form] God.” The question of what it means to be “in very nature God” has stirred much debate and controversy amongst New Testament scholarship. The Greek word for nature or form is *morphe*. Despite recent (and recent alone) interpreters, such as James Dunn, who see an exclusivistic Last-Adam Christology (and suppose no pre-existent divinity whatsoever in the passage),³² the language being used presupposes what the rest of the sentence already assumes, namely, the one who has “equality” with God is *emptying* Himself.³³ You cannot empty yourself and make yourself in human likeness if you are already in human likeness. Which means that *before* taking the form (*morphe*) of a slave, He had to *already been* in the form (*morphe*) of God. Dunn’s interpretation of this text, does not in any way, allow it to speak for itself.

For the sake of being faithful to the text, I think the best way to understand the noun *morphe*, is to let the text define it for us. We have to look at vv. 6-7 as expressing a not/rather (or but) juxtaposing effect. So what we see is that in the same verse, Paul says, “did not consider *equality* with God”. From my perspective, it seems safe to say that the one, who is in God’s form, is the only one that can have actual equality with God. So, what it seems Paul is expressing through this not/rather (but) juxtaposition, is that Christ, who participated in the eternal divine *morphe* of God, considered it *not harpagmon* (to take advantage of), *but* instead of doing so, He poured Himself out, or made Himself nothing.

³² James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?: The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 136-38.

³³ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. 202-203.

It is important to briefly talk about the word *harpagmon* that I mentioned just above. The word itself is rarely used in the New Testament, so it has caused a lot of work (especially in the field of philology) to understand what Paul is expressing by his use of it. It seems from a literary and contextual basis, that the best way to understand it is to see Paul expressing that Christ did not consider the equality He *already* had with God a prized possession to be retained or selfishly exploited to his own advantage.³⁴ Essentially, Christ did not consider His being divine something to be used as a means of selfish and prideful gains, as did the lords of the Roman Empire. Though we have to be exceedingly careful we do not read an idea that is not present in this text, it seems that what is later expressed in Matthew 20:28 (or perhaps pre-Matthew in Q) of the Son of Man not coming to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for the many is explicitly present in Paul's thought.

I have a few important thoughts on verse 6 that seem worth mentioning. One is that Philippians seems to be accepted by the majority of New Testament scholarship as pre-Gospel literature, including even the Gospel of Mark. Also, what we see in Paul's letter to the Philippians is that before any of the Gospels were written, Paul already presupposed the pre-existence of Jesus before the writing of this letter. The reason being is the very fact that Jesus' pre-existence is taken for granted in this letter. Eminent New Testament scholar, Larry Hurtado, says, "This is very significant in historical terms. It means that the lofty things attributed to Jesus in this passage were already sufficiently familiar, at least in the early Christian circles in which Paul moved, that Paul felt no need to introduce or explain this remarkable, almost lyrical

³⁴ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to Philippians*. 129.

statement of Jesus' acts and standing."³⁵ So it is consistent to assume that well before the production of this letter, Paul's friends in Philippi already assumed a high Christology.

7 Paul, in verse 7, states that in contrast to him using his status of divinity as something to be exploited, or used to his advantage in a selfish way (comparable with the selfish ambition or vain conceit of v. 3), "he made himself nothing."³⁶ It seems to me that the NASB renders it best, it says "but [Christ] emptied himself". *Emptied* is the English translation of the Greek verb Kenosis. This word means "to empty; deprive; to be hollow, emptied, of no value."³⁷ The emptied imagery that is being used seems to connect well, especially well with 2:17, where Paul is being "poured out" as a drink offering. It seems that this is a Pauline favorite by his use of it elsewhere (Rom. 5:5; Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6; Titus 3:6).

The quite typical understanding of this passage, has led scholars to assume that Christ *emptied* himself from something in particular, such as his divine attributes or in some kind of divine forbearance.³⁸ Though this could be used as a proof text for a powerful and beautiful true point, it seems that Paul is not emphasizing this here. As Gordon Fee notes, the reason for this has stemmed out "of a faulty understanding of *harpagmon* or because it has been assumed that the verb requires a genitive qualifier - that he must have "emptied himself" *of something*."³⁹ Likewise, Michael J. Gorman states:

³⁵ Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus*, 87.

³⁶ The New American Standard Bible

³⁷ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible (2009 edition): NIV Edition, Burgundy Bonded (Key Word Study Bibles)* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2009).

³⁸ Ben Witherington, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians*. 41.

³⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. 210.

The phrase ‘emptied himself’ in 2:7 should not be read as a reference to the divestiture of something (whether divinity itself or some divine attribute), or even as self-limitation regarding the use of divine attributes, but ‘figuratively’, as a robust metaphor for total self-abandonment and self giving, further explained by the attendant participial phrases “taking on the form of a slave” and “being born [found] in human likeness.” That is, he “*poured himself out*” [emphasis mine] probably an echo of the suffering servant.⁴⁰

Thus, it seems that Paul is making a straightforward point. Christ *emptied* himself (as shown in the drink offering metaphor above) “by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Paul is expressing that the way Christ emptied himself, was in his taking nature of a slave by being made in human likeness.

What makes the above point so breathtaking is the very fact that it represents the nature of our God. Yes, our God is One who inhabits eternity, but he is also with the meek and the lowly. When Christ became incarnate, we see that the fullness of who God is was revealed in and through Jesus by how he lived, in how he died, and how the Father vindicated Him by resurrection from the dead. N.T. Wright says it well “The real humiliation of the incarnation and the cross is that one who was himself God, and who never during the whole process stopped being God, could embrace such a vocation.”⁴¹ Thus, from what is knowable through the text itself, it is safe to say that Paul is indeed, not emphasizing abnegation of his divinity. Rather, the concern is with divine selflessness. God is not some form of acquisitive being that grasps and

⁴⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 21.

⁴¹ Stephen Fowl, *Philippians (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 96.

seizes, rather he is self-giving for the sake of others. Who Jesus is, was poured out to us in the incarnation.

Though, for the sake of conversation and honesty, it seems that for the development of a consensual christology between the Gospels and Paul, it could very well be possible to assume that this is already presupposed in Paul's anthropology. For instance, Paul's conceptual understanding of what it means to be human could very well be devoid of the *ability* or must include the purposeful self-abnegation of divine power. So this would already be included in Paul's understanding when he writes, "by taking the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

8 *"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death - even death on a cross!"*

In continual downward succession from verse 7, Paul continues to solidify how far Christ went. In this passage, it is explicitly clear, *Christ was not humbled*, to the contrary; *He humbled Himself*. Kierkegaard, when writing about this passage said, "Christ humbled *himself*---not, he *was* humbled. O infinite sublimity, of which it must categorically be true that there was none in heaven or on earth or in the abyss that could humble him! He humbled himself."⁴² He *became* obedient unto death; Paul, if the passage is read properly, seems not to be concerned with *who* it is Christ obeyed in his self-humiliation as a human being, but rather, he is interested in the very fact that Christ, indeed, *did* obey in his humiliation.⁴³

The repetition of the word "death" is Paul emphasizing the dramatic action Christ has taken on behalf of his people and in obedience to God the Father. In first century Judaism, it was

⁴² Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, Anniversary ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 65.

“death on a cross” that was understood to be the most loathsome death one could undergo.⁴⁴ Yet Christ, willingly and acceptingly, took it upon Himself to accomplish the mission that was set before him. What kind of death did he die? The most loathsome, shameful, degrading, and putrid of all, the utterly disgusting death on a cross. It was here that Jesus met the rock bottom in humiliation.

It is thought that humbling oneself is the thing for weak and little people to do. With movie stars, professional sports players, and business owners driving around in their expensive vehicles, living in their million dollar fortune homes, and wearing the most expensive clothing, it is the cultural ideal that wealth and high status are synonymous with strength. I say that this is a falsity. I say that it requires a strong man to humble himself. It is this that we see explicitly by the one who inhabited eternity, the one who is in the very form of God. The strongest one alive was the one who humbled Himself. And the ultimate matter of fact is this: *God's way of flexing his muscles was in the most degrading death of all, “death - even death on a cross!”*

9 *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,”*

In verses 6-8 of this narrative, as already noted, we see Christ humbling himself; starting in verse 9, a transition occurs where it is now God the Father doing the exaltation. Everything in this passage has suddenly and dramatically taken a shift; indeed, in vv. 6-8, Christ is the subject of all the verbs and participles; here, God the Father is the subject and Christ the object of vindication, the recipient of the divine “name that is above every name”, and the one to whom

⁴⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (New International Greek Testament Com (Eerdmans) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 230.

“every knee should bow” and “every tongue confess” Lordship, in which by doing, all glory is given to the his Father.⁴⁵

Paul, in the first part of this verse exclaims, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place”. “*Therefore*”: it is because the selfless faithfulness of Jesus the messiah that God had vindicated him from death. As mentioned above, it is God now who is doing the exaltation, not Jesus.

“*God exalted him to the highest place*”: in Jewish monotheistic circles, the only one who is in the highest place is God; beyond God, any good Jew would have cried blasphemy (Matt. 26:63-65). When Jews talked of God being in the highest place, it is Jewish imagery of YHWH’s sovereign rule over *all* things. Thus, when Jesus is exalted by the Father to the highest place, it is he who is now ruling sovereign over all authorities, rulers, and lords, including Caesar himself.

When it comes to Christology and Paul’s understanding of where Jesus stands in relationship to God the Father, Richard Bauckham has proposed what is called a Christology of divine identity.⁴⁶ It would make little to no sense to Jews in the Second Temple era to say one other than God shares in his sovereignty, a position proponents of functional Christology endorse. Thus, Bauckham argues that Paul understood Jesus as a member sharing within the divine identity of God. Though it would be anachronistic to say Paul formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, what is safe to say, is that Paul, though not understanding this through Greek logic, but as a Jew, laid the foundation for the development of Trinitarian theology.

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody: Baker Academic, 2007), 393-94.

⁴⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 6-31.

“*And gave him the name that is above every name,*” Paul now states that God the Father gave Jesus this name that is higher than all. What on earth could this mean? Various ideas have been proposed. Some say the name above every name is Jesus, due to this sentence being the antecedent of “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.” But it seems that this does not work properly with Paul’s drastic upward shift (think V) in the narrative; and even more noteworthy, the name of Jesus was not something Jesus was given at his exaltation, but rather the name at his birth. Thus, it not being possible. So what is this name above all names?

Richard Bauckham, in his essay “Paul’s Christology of Divine Identity”, insists emphatically that “There can be no doubt that ‘the name that above every name’ (v.9) is YHWH: it is inconceivable that any Jewish writer could use this phrase for a name other than God’s own unique name. Contrary to much comment on this passage, the name itself is not ‘Lord’ (*kurios*: v. 11), which is not the divine name or even a Greek translation of the name, but a conventional Greek reverential *substitute* for the name.⁴⁷

What is particularly interesting about this verse, is what Paul says occurred. He asserts that God “*gave*” Jesus this name that is above all. When one takes this into account, it raises a numerous amount of perplexing and cryptic questions (especially in regards to functions within the Trinity, ones of which require further research. The Greek verb used for “*gave*” is *charizomai*.⁴⁸ As Gordon Fee points out, the verb is formed from the Greek noun used for the word grace. He thus argues that it is supposed to be understood as the word “graced”, a Pauline

⁴⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity*. 199.

⁴⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans', 1985), 1304-5.

favorite.⁴⁹ Jesus being *graced* with this name would imply emphatically that he *did not* previously have it.

Though it requires further exploration, from my perspective, it seems this name is in connection with the rights to exercise sovereignty. It is because Jesus is the Lord (a name used for the caesars) over all, that he has the rights to exercise sovereignty over everything. The implications of this are that Jesus, indeed, was not the one exercising sovereignty until thereafter humbling himself, and God exalting him (even before his becoming human). It was God the Father's function, within the Triune family, that up until this time, exercised sovereignty over creation.

Just as the one within the Roman Empire who bore the title "Caesar", so it seems possible, Paul understood the one who bears the title YHWH (Lord in the LXX), the divine name, as having the rights to exercise divine sovereignty over all. It is Jesus, God the Father's eschatological suffering Christ, who was therefore exalted, given the divine name, and now ruling as the true and perfect King, the eschatological ruler of the entire world.

What I have realized, is that this passage, as much about Jesus as it is, has something powerful to say about God the Father. Yes, it is Jesus, the suffering and humble messiah that shows us the very humble and beautiful nature of the God. But even more, Paul, it seems confirms this as true by showing us that God the Father has given up to Jesus the rights to reign as the eschatological sovereign King over *all*. A very humble thing to do!

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study*, 396

10-11 “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Paul makes a literary parallel here with Isaiah 45:18-24 and explicitly shows that through Christ’s resurrection and at his ascension, God transferred the right of obeisance to the Son.⁵⁰ It are these two verses which show us that one day or another, all will bow the knee and acknowledge the sovereignty of Jesus as the one who bears the tetragrammaton, YHWH.

Whether the devil, Nero, or Hitler like it or not, they will at one point, in God’s grand schema, bow the knee and confess that Jesus is the one who is Lord over all. It is this proclamation that the Church practices (and has practiced) here in expectation and hope. It is the proclamation that Jesus is still Lord when a 9.0 earthquake shakes Japan; it is the belief that as a child’s parent gets slaughtered in Africa for the Gospel, that Jesus is Lord; it is the hope that Jesus, the sovereign ruler, will one day come as the sovereign king to set all things to rights.

What we see in the end (and throughout vv. 9-11) is a carefully constructed framework for unity and diversity in the Godhead.⁵¹ Paul, at the end of this narrative says “to the glory of God the Father”; yes, Jesus is given the divine Name, but he is *given* it by the Father; and it is in the end, that when all bow, and when all acknowledge that Jesus has very well been the sovereign ruler over all, that God, his Father, our Father, receives glory.

Contemporary Application

⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study*, 398

⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, 101.

The late great New Testament scholar, Ernst Käsemann, once remarked that the cross is “the signature of the one who is risen.”⁵² It is through the lens of the cross we are to look at God. If one takes seriously that Jesus is the exact representation of the Father (Heb. 1:3), one is led to conclude that our God is the God who risks, the God who suffers, the God who cares, the God who is humble, the God who *loves*.

What is more important to Christianity than our doctrine of God? If one has an improper view of the attributes and nature of God, one is misrepresenting the greatest conceivable being. We see clearly and painfully as to what occurs when the Church has a misconception of the nature of our God. What we see are millions of people murdered systematically in Nazi death camps; what we see are hundreds of thousands of people slaughtered by Crusaders; what we see are people dancing and rejoicing at the murder of a terrorist who did not know him.

So what happens when we have a proper view of God? What we see is the wall, that once separated whites and blacks, *demolished*; what we see is a lady, *possessed* with the humility and love of Jesus, care achingly for India; what we see, is a rich Caucasian male, *give up the status of wealth* and form a non-profit organization called Charity Water.

If we take seriously that we are the *imago dei* (image of God) and that we, as God’s people in this world, are the representatives for who God is in this world, then we will take seriously the need to have a proper understanding of what God is like.

I am convinced that when Paul wrote, “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus”, the concept of us, as God’s people, reflecting who he is into this world, was in the back of his head. This is why we are here! Jesus came not only to die for us, but also came to show us how to truly

⁵² Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Mifflintown: Sigler Pr, 1996), 56.

live. Or, another way to understand this is by realizing that one of the reasons *Jesus died, was so we can live like him*. Paul, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., and others down the ages have understood this. They realized that having the same mindset that was in Jesus will indeed result in a process of self-degradation, but what they also realized is that God is not finished; death will not have the last word, says the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Cor. 15)!

“Where is God in Japan?” when that earthquake shook their nation, one might ask. “Where is God in Tuscaloosa, Alabama?” when it was turned upside down by tornados. The mystery of the incarnation is what we, as Christians, have on all other religions. Jesus was the very vehicle of God’s eschatological Spirit, the Spirit that is causing us, God’s people, to experience the new creation promised in Revelation 22. When Jesus fed the 5,000, they smelled the new creation, when Jesus cast a demon out of a child, he experienced the new creation, when Jesus was resurrected from the dead he witnessed the *new* creation. As Jesus was all God, so now, by his death and resurrection, we are incarnate (by the Holy Spirit) children of God. In church, when one says, “God lives in me.” they far from recognize the real meaning; what they are saying is “God’s Spirit is incarnate within me.” So when one asks “Where is God in Japan?” *An* answer is that he is not there in the way he probably wants to be, *if we are not there*. It is in broken situations that God is shouting loudly in our faces “Show them my love! Let them experience a smell of this new creation!” God wants to *partner* with us, as his representatives in this world, who take on his *mindset* to bring forth his Kingdom in this world.

As I have shown above, our understandings of who God is, affects us in the way we react to our environment. So when the church takes seriously the cruciform God of Philippians 2:6-11,

and Paul's exhortation to those believers to be like him, it will cause a reaction that stirs us to imitate this God into this world. When disasters occur, when tyrannical leaders rule, when justice is being ignored, it us as, as Christians, that need to hear the words of Paul "he made himself nothing" and was "obedient unto death - even death on a cross!" And what will we see when this happens? What will we see when we listen and obey? What we will see is *Jesus*.

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