

Philippians 2:5-11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?

Gordon D. Fee

Regent College Vancouver, Canada

[p.29]

This remarkable passage is at once one of the most exalted, one of the most beloved, and one of the most discussed and debated passages in the Pauline corpus. Because of its sheer grandeur, it has assumed a role both in the church and in private devotional life quite apart from its original context, as a piece of early christology. Scholarship, on the other hand, because of its exalted description of Christ in the midst of a piece of paraenesis, has long debated its meaning and role in its present context. Indeed, so much is this so that one can easily be intimidated by the sheer bulk of the literature, which is enough to daunt even the hardiest of souls.¹ The debate covers a broad range of concerns: form, origins, background of ideas, its overall meaning and place in context, and the meaning of several key words and phrases (ἄρπαγμός, μορφή, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ, κενόω). But the one place where there has been a general consensus is that it was originally a hymn; in fact the language "Christ-hymn" has become a semi-technical term in our discipline to refer to this passage in particular.

The present paper finds its starting point in two recent studies on this passage. First, in N. T. Wright's especially helpful overview both of the ἄρπαγμός debate and the overall meaning of the passage in its context, he concludes by challenging: "But if someone were to take it upon themselves to argue, on the basis of my conclusions, that the 'hymn' was originally written by Paul himself... I should find it hard to produce convincing counter-arguments."² Second, in Moises Silva's recent and very helpful commentary,³ he argues for its being

[p.30]

a hymn,⁴ very much as it is displayed in NA²⁶, yet in the subsequent commentary, he frankly admits that "the structure of vv. 9-11 is not characterized by the large number of parallel and contrasting items that have been recognized in vv. 6-8" and then proceeds to describe the sentence in thoroughly non-strophic, non-hymnic terms.⁵

My concern in this brief paper is a modest one: primarily I want to call into question the whole matter of the passage as a hymn, which, despite most scholarship to the contrary, it almost certainly is not; and second I hope to show that one can best understand its role in the context by a structural analysis of the kind one would do with any piece of Pauline prose. The

¹ Martin's *Carmen Christi* is 319 pages long and includes a bibliography of over 500 items, to which one may now add at least 50 more items. See R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

² N. T. Wright, "ἄρπαγμός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," *JTS* 37 NS (1986) 321-52.

³ Moises Silva, *The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary: Philippians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

⁴ Indeed, he specifically rejects the language "elevated prose" as not doing "justice to the rhythm, parallelisms, lexical links, and other features that characterize these verses" (p. 105).

⁵ Silva, p. 127.

net result is an argument in favor of its Pauline origins in this context and for a meaning very much like that offered by Wright and Silva.

My own exegetical concerns, therefore, remain constant: to discover the meaning of this passage in terms of its place in its own context.⁶ But in this case there are several issues that must be noted, since they affect one's view of so much: (1) its form; (2) two closely related concerns—(a) authorship and (b) background; and (3) its place in context. The larger issues of the meaning of some key words and phrases will be noted only in passing as they affect these other concerns.

I. THE QUESTION OF FORM

The almost universal judgment of scholarship is that in Phil 2:6-11 we are dealing with an early hymn about Christ.⁷ The reasons for this judgment are basically four: (1) The ὄς with which it begins is paralleled in other passages in the NT also understood to be christological hymns (Col 1:15, 18; 1 Tim 3:16); (2) the exalted language and rhythmic quality of the whole; (3) the conviction that the whole can be displayed to show structured parallelism, of a kind with other pieces of Semitic poetry; (4) the language and structure seem to give

[p.31]

these verses an internal coherence that separates them from the discourse of the epistle itself at this point.⁸

But despite the nearly universal acceptance of this point of view, there are good reasons to pause:

First, one must note that if it was originally a hymn of some kind, it contains nothing at all of the nature of Greek hymnody or poetry. Therefore, it must be Semitic in origin. But as will be pointed out, the alleged Semitic parallelism of this piece is quite unlike any known example of Hebrew psalmody. The word "hymn" properly refers to a song in praise of deity; in its present form—and even in its several reconstructed forms—this passage lacks the rhythm and parallelism that one might expect of material that is to be sung. And in any case, it fits very poorly with the clearly hymnic material in the Psalter—or in Luke 1:46-55, 68-79, or in 1 Timothy 3:16b, to name but a few clear NT examples of hymns.

⁶ I should note here that this paper was completed before the monograph by Stephen E. Fowl was available (*The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul; An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* [JSNTSS 36; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990]). Fowl's concerns are quite similar to those of this paper. He clearly calls into question whether Phil 2:6-11 is a hymn in any meaningful sense of that term ("these passages are hymns in the very general sense of poetic accounts of the nature and/or activity of a divine figure"), yet finally treats the passage as a "hymn" in his totally watered down sense. His conclusion as to its role in the present context and in the letter as a whole is very similar to what I argue for here.

⁷ Thus the title of Martin's monograph.

⁸ On the matter of criteria for distinguishing hymns and confessional materials in the NT, see esp. W. Hulitt Gloer, "Homologies and Hymns in the New Testament: Form, Content and Criteria for Identification," *PRS* 11 (1984) 115-32. Although this passage reflects several of Gloer's criteria, that fact that vv. 9-11 fit them all so poorly should give us all reason to pause.

Second, one must insist that exalted prose does not necessarily mean that one is dealing with a hymn. The same objections that I have raised as to the hymnic character of 1 Corinthians 13 must also be raised here.⁹ Paul is capable of especially exalted prose whenever he thinks on the work of Christ.

Third, the ὅς in this case is not precisely like its alleged parallels in Col 1:15 (18b) and 1 Tim 3:16. In the former case, even though its antecedent is the υἱοῦ of the preceding clause, the resultant connection of the "hymn" with its antecedent is not at all smooth.¹⁰ In the latter case, the connection of the ὅς to the rest of the sentence is ungrammatical, thus suggesting that it belonged to an original hymn (and should be translated with a "soft" antecedent, "he who"). But in the present case the ὅς does not belong to an original hymn, but to a perfectly normal Pauline sentence in which it immediately follows its antecedent, Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Fourth, and for me this is the clinching matter, in Paul's Greek, as exalted as it is, the sentences follow one another in perfectly orderly prose—all quite in Pauline style. It begins (a) with a relative clause, in which two ideas are set off with a typically Pauline οὐκ/

[p.32]

ἀλλά contrast, followed (b) by another clause begun with καί, all of which (c) is followed by a final sentence begun with an inferential διὸ καί, and concluding with a ἵνα (probably result) clause in two parts, plus a ὅτι clause. What needs to be noted is, first, that this is as typically Pauline argumentation as one can find anywhere in his letters; and, second, that there are scores of places in Paul where there are more balanced structures than this, but where, because of the subject matter, no one suspects Paul of citing poetry or writing hymnody.¹¹ His own rhetorical style is simply replete with examples of balanced structures, parallelism, chiasmus, etc.

Fifth and finally, one must note how irregular so many of the alleged lines are, if they are supposed to function as lines of Semitic poetry. For example, in the most commonly accepted structural arrangement, as it is displayed in the NA²⁶,¹² there are no verbs at all in six of the "lines":¹³

6c	τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ
8d	θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ

⁹ See G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 626.

¹⁰ Indeed, there is nothing else quite like this in Paul, where one has the order ἐν ᾧ - ὅς ("in whom"—"who"), rather than the expected ὅς - ἐν ᾧ. The subsequent ὅτι in v. 16h which looks like a *berakoth* formula from the Psalter, plus the second ὅς in 18b, also makes one think that we are here dealing with a hymn fragment of some kind.

¹¹ E.g., several passages in 1 Corinthians come immediately to mind: 1:22-25; 1:26-28; 6:12-13; 7:2-4; 9:19-22, etc.

¹² For convenience I have put this display in Appendix I, with each of the lines numbered. This in fact is basically the proposal of E. Lohmeyer, who omitted line 8d (θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ) as a "Pauline interpolation." It has also been adopted *inter alia* by Beare, Benoit, Bernard, Cullmann, and Hering (see Martin, *Carmen Christi*, 30 n. 1, for other bibliography).

¹³ There is also no verb expressed in line 11b, κύριος, Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, but this is a nominal sentence in which an ἐστίν is presupposed. It is not surprising that four of these verbless "lines" are in vv. 9-11, which has nothing at all of the quality of poetry to it.

- 9c τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὄνομα
10a ἵνα ἐν ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ
10c ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων
11c εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς

Moreover, the placement of the verbs that do appear are anything but in a balanced poetic pattern; the verb appears last in lines 6a, b, 7a, b, c, 9a, and first in 8b, c.

This is simply not the "stuff" of poetry. Indeed any alleged "lines" of poetry like those listed above are not natural to the text, but are simply the creation of the scholars who have here found a "hymn."

It should be noted, of course, that not all scholars adopt this scheme; indeed there are at least five other basic proposals, with modifications in several of them: (1) L. Cerfaux¹⁴ and J. Jeremias¹⁵

[p.33]

adopted a scheme of three stanzas each (Cerfaux's strophes have four, five, and six lines each; Jeremias's strophes have four lines each, excising lines 8d, 10c, 11c). The stanzas in this case correspond to the three states of Jesus' existence: pre-existence, earthly life, and exaltation. As over against Lohmeyer's proposal, these, of course, catch the point of Paul's argument, but they are less successful as "lines." (2) Ralph Martin¹⁶ offered a modification of Lohmeyer, in which there are six stanzas of two lines each. This proposal has the advantage of trying to establish lines of generally equal length (although not totally successfully), each of which has a verb form; but to do so he omits lines 8d, 10c, and 11c, and performs rather radical surgery on the sense, especially his stanzas C and D:

- (α) ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος
(β) καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος
- (α) ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν
(β) γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου

(3) Collange,¹⁷ followed by Talbert,¹⁸ offers four stanzas of four lines each. The advantage of this scheme is that it does not resort to omissions to make it work; on the other hand, it leaves one with lines of unequal length, some of which are without verb forms, and must (quite unsuccessfully) divide vv. 9-11 into two stanzas. (4) M. Dibelius¹⁹ suggested an arrangement of five stanzas of varying length, and varying lines, which also included several modifications

¹⁴ "L'hymne au Christ—Serviteur de Dieu (*Phil.*, II, 6-11 = *Is.* LII,13-LIII,12)," in *Miscellanea historica in honorem Alberti de Meyer* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'université, 1946), 1, 117-30.

¹⁵ "Zur Gedankenführung in den paulinischen Briefen," in *Studia Paulina in honorem J. de Zwaan* (ed. J. W. Sevenster and W. C. van Unnik; Haarlem, 1953) 152-54; cf. "Zu Phil ii 7: Ἐαυτὸν, Ἐκένωσεν," *NovT* 6 (1963) 182-88.

¹⁶ *In Carmen Christi*, 36-38.

¹⁷ *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Philippiciens* (Neuchâtel, 1973).

¹⁸ C. H. Talbert, "The Problem of Pre-existence in Philippians 2:6-11," *JBL* 86 (1967) 141-53.

¹⁹ *An die Thessalonicher; an die Philipper* (*HNT*; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), ³1937) 72-74.

of the text. But such a proposal almost eliminates any feature of what one might consider poetry. (5) G. Strecker²⁰ offered the most radical surgery of all. Excising all of v. 8 as Pauline, he then adduced two strophes with six lines divided into couplets of two.

It is difficult to know how to assess all of this. When one reads Martin or Talbert, for example, the discussion is carried on with the presupposition that everyone recognizes the passage as a hymn; they only differ as to its original form. On the other hand, such reading also makes one feel like the little boy in the fairy tale, who exclaimed that the emperor had no clothes. From this perspective the very lack of agreement should call into question the whole procedure. And if one respond that there is agreement at least on the fact that it is a hymn, the rebuttal still remains: if so, then one should expect that its

[p.34]

parts would be more plainly visible to all. Such is certainly the case with Col 1:15-18 and 1 Tim 3:16; but here all the arrangements are flawed in some way or another. Either one must (1) excise lines, (2) dismiss the obvious inner logic of the whole, or (3) create lines that are either without parallelism or verbless.

It should be noted further in this regard that any excision of words or lines is an exercise in exegetical futility. It implies, and this is sometimes vigorously defended,²¹ that the real concern of exegesis is the meaning of the "hymn" on its own, apart from its present context. But this is exegetically indefensible, since (1) our only access to the "hymn" is in its present form and present position, and (2) we must begin any legitimate exegesis by assuming that all the present words are included because they contribute in some way to Paul's own concerns. To assume otherwise is a form of exegetical nihilism, in which on non-demonstrable prior grounds, one determines that an author did not mean anything by the words he uses.

All of this leads me to pick up on the suggestion made above (reason 4) that in the final analysis, the passage can best be understood in terms of its three clear sentences (vv. 6-7; v. 8; vv. 9-11), which, of course, is a modification of Jeremias's analysis without the need to resort to a hymn or excision of its parts. In this scheme the first two sentences emphasize the two concerns of vv. 3-4—humility and selflessness—but pick them up in reverse order, while the third emphasizes the divine vindication of such. This is not to deny that some of it may have had prior existence—perhaps as something creedal? But it is to argue that all of this has become subservient to Paul's present interests, which is to urge harmony in the Philippian community, by pressing for those Christ-like qualities most necessary for it, selflessness and humility.

II. THE QUESTION OF BACKGROUND / AUTHORSHIP

The questions of background and authorship are closely related, in that once the passage was isolated as a "hymn," then certain features were "discovered" to be "un-Pauline" (with alleged Pauline features "missing"), which in turn led many to argue that the whole was both pre-

²⁰ "Redaktion and Tradition im Christushymnus, Phil. 2:6-11," *ZNW* 55 (1964) 63-78.

²¹ E.g., by Käsemann, Martin, and O'Connor.

Pauline and therefore non-Pauline.²² Once that was established, then it was necessary to find its original *Sitz im Leben*. It should not surprise us, given the assumptions of the methodology, that scholars found what they were looking for. Nor should it sur-

[p.35]

prise one that, as with form, every imaginable background has been argued for:

- a. Heterodox Judaism (Lohmeyer)
- b. Iranian myth of the Heavenly Redeemer (Beare)
- c. Hellenistic, pre-Christian Gnosticism (Käsemann)
- d. Jewish Gnosticism (J. A. Sanders)
- e. OT Servant passages (Coppens, Moule, Strimple)
- f. Genesis account of Adam (Murphy- O'Connor, Dunn)
- g. Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom speculation (Georgi)

The very diversity of these proposals suggests something of the futility (dare one say irrelevance?) of this exercise. After all, one comes by this by guessing at what are alleged to be "Pauline adaptations and interpolations," which means that one is fairly free to create as one wills.

Furthermore, all of this becomes especially pernicious, when one argues, as does J. Murphy-O'Connor,²³ that since Paul did not compose it, then one may not use other Pauline words—or even the present context!—to interpret it. That is, not only can it be isolated from its context, it is argued, but since Paul did not write it, it must be so isolated and must be understood on its own, without reference either to Paul or to its present Pauline context. That is an exegetical tour de force of almost unparalleled boldness.

Furthermore, I would argue, such a view shows very little sensitivity either to Paul or to the nature of composition in antiquity. On the one hand, Paul is quite capable of citing,²⁴ when that suits him. Sometimes he adapts; sometimes he cites rather closely. But in all cases, the citation is both clearly identifiable and capable of making at least fairly good sense in its context. That is, Paul apparently chooses to cite because he wants to support or elaborate a point. On the other hand, there are all kinds of evidence that in other cases ancient authors—and Paul should most likely be included here—also took over other material rather wholesale and adapted it to fit their own compositions (the Gospels being a clear case in point). In these latter cases, even when they may have carried over some of the language from their source(s), they clearly intend for the present material not to be identifiable as to its source precisely because for them it is now their own material. So in the present case. Here Paul dictates, and the amanuensis transcribes, letter by letter (or syllable by

[p.36]

²² By "un-Pauline" I mean "that which is uncharacteristic of Paul"; "non-Pauline" means that it is judged as quite foreign to Paul.

²³ J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Christological Anthropology in Phil. 11:6-11," *RB* 83 (1976) 25-50.

²⁴ By "citing" I refer to that kind of quotation from the OT or elsewhere, where some kind of introductory formula is used, or as in the case of 1 Cor 10:26, a γάρ is used with a quote that the Apostle can assume will be well known to his readers.

syllable), without any sense that a source needs to be noted. One must always keep in mind that in the original letter what we call vv. 5 and 6 would have been "run on," something like this:

... ENΧΡΙΣΤΩΙΗΣΟΥΟΣΕΝΜΟΡΦΗΘΕΟΥΥΠΙΑΡΧΩΝΟΥΧΑΡΡΙΑΓΜΟΝ...

What must be noted is that in this kind of process, one can only speak of "writing in" or "composition"; the language "interpolation" or "insertion" simply will not do, since they mislead as to the actual historical process. Therefore, to take out some of this "written in" material, as if it were an extraneous citation, when there is not a hint of citation anywhere, and then to urge that it can only be understood apart from its original context, is to argue for exegetical anarchy.²⁵

Others, especially Käsemann²⁶ and Martin, seem to make the same exegetical error, though a little more subtly. In their case the meaning of the "hymn" is discovered first of all in isolation from its present context, then that meaning is contended for as the one Paul himself intends in context. There is an obvious circularity to this kind of reasoning; thus it does not surprise one that almost all who go this route have the common denominator of opposition to the so-called ethical interpretation of the passage.

But as before, it needs to be stressed (1) that Paul is the author in terms of its inclusion, including all the present words, and (2) that although Paul often quotes, this does not come by way of quotation; the alleged "hymn" is a grammatical piece within the present context. Whereas one might legitimately look separately at a piece of quoted material, speculate as to its original meaning, and then wonder whether an author has correctly understood that original meaning, neither the grammar, the content, or the context allow such a procedure here. As Morna Hooker put it: "For even if the material is non-Pauline, we may expect Paul himself to have interpreted it and used it in a Pauline manner."²⁷ Indeed, of this whole enterprise Hooker says (correctly):

If the passage is pre-Pauline, then we have no guide lines to help us in understanding its meaning. Commentators may speculate about the background—but we know very little about pre-Pauline Christianity,

[p.37]

and nothing at all about the context in which the passage originated. It may therefore be more profitable to look first at the function of these verses in the present context and to enquire about possible parallels within Paul's own writings.²⁸

²⁵ Cf. the critique by Robert B. Strimple, "Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Studies: Some Exegetical Conclusions," *WTJ* 41 (1979) 247-68, esp. 250-51.

²⁶ E. Käsemann, "Kritische Analyse von Phil. 2, 5-11," *ZThK* 47 (1950) 313-60; Eng. trans., "A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11," in *God and Christ: Existence and Province (Journal for Theology and Church* 5; ed. R. W. Funk; New York: Harper, 1968) 45-88.

²⁷ See Morna D. Hooker, "Philippians 2:6-11," in *Jesus and Paulus: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel zum 70 Geburtstag* (ed. E. Earle Ellis and Erich Grasser; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 151-64 (from p. 152).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

"Of course," one wishes to respond to such an eminently reasonable proposal; otherwise why did Paul write it into this context as something that in v. 12 he will argue from!²⁹

III. THE QUESTION OF ITS PLACE IN CONTEXT

Käsemann notes that the so-called ethical interpretation had held sway universally up to the 1920's. As Strimple notes,³⁰ one can well understand *why*, since this is such an obvious reading of the passage in its present context (*pace* Martin, who continually refers to "the thin thread"). However, as Hurtado has decisively demonstrated,³¹ Käsemann objects not primarily on exegetical, but theological, grounds. Here one can see, and sympathize with, his fierce antipathy to the Old Liberalism. His point, therefore, and in this he is followed by Martin, is that Paul's reason for including it is *not* example, but to provide the ground (basis) for Christian behavior. Hence an understanding of the ἐν Χριστῷ in v. 5 as locative of sphere (i.e., the common sphere of Christian existence) is absolutely crucial to this enterprise. The emphasis is thus placed *not* on Christ's humiliation in vv. 6-8, which functions merely to set up the real point, but on Christ's victory in vv. 9-11. Christians are being urged to live in the realm where Christ has triumphed for us over the demonic powers.

Although one might object to that theologically—as Marshall points out,³² the reason for Christ's death is no longer sin but subjection to the "powers"—the ultimate problem is still contextual *per se*. First, the use of the verb φρονεῖτε in v. 5 demands that Paul is still concerned with the issue of vv. 1-4; otherwise, the use of language becomes nearly meaningless. Furthermore, the points made about Christ in vv. 6-8 are precisely those of vv. 3-4—selflessness and humility. Indeed, the key sentence (v. 8) includes the two key words

[p.38]

found on either side in the context: ταπεινώω (v. 3) and ὑπόκοος (v. 12). What the Philippian believers are being called to, humility toward one another and obedience in this matter, is what Christ did as man. Again, it must be urged that it is a cardinal rule in exegesis to assume a logical thread to an argument, unless there are especially convincing reasons for thinking otherwise. In this case, 1:27; 2:1-4, 5-8, and 2:12-13, hold together very nicely. Harmony is the issue: humility and selflessness are the way to it. The final exhortation to obedience in vv. 12-13 therefore also has to do with unity/harmony. Since the first half of the "hymn" makes precisely that point, why go elsewhere for understanding?

Martin, following Käsemann, raises two objections: (1) One cannot really follow Christ's example, which according to Martin, is not his self-sacrifice on earth, but "the incarnation of a

²⁹ Most of those who write on this passage simply fail to come to terms with the ὥστε that begins v. 12. Not only is this a thoroughly Pauline form of argumentation, but it is so in such a way that what precedes forms the theological basis for the concluding paraenesis.

³⁰ Strimple, "Conclusions," 252.

³¹ Larry W. Hurtado, "Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5-11," in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare* (eds. P. Richardson and J. C. Hurd; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984) 113-26.

³² See I. Howard Marshall, "The Christ-Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11: A Review Article," *TynBul* 19 (1968) 104-27.

heavenly being"; and (2) in any case, the main point of the passage is vv. 9-11, Christ's present lordly triumph, which we cannot follow.

But in response, as has often been pointed out: (1) The issue is not "imitating" Christ in the sense of repeating what he did—that is seldom the sense of "imitation" in the NT³³—but in being like him "in mind." For Paul "imitatio" does not ordinarily mean, "Do as I did," but "Be as I am." In Jesus' self-emptying and self-sacrifice, which are significant precisely because they secured redemption for us, he also exemplified for us proper selflessness and humility. Here we have the truest expression of the character of God himself, which through Christ and the Spirit he is trying to recreate in his people. In this regard one should note the use of the example of Christ in Rom 15:1-7, 2 Cor 8:9, and 1 Cor 10:31-11:1 (see also 1 Pet 2:21!). Such an appeal assumes the life and death of Christ as the ground of our being—that, after all, is precisely what makes the example such a powerful one—but that is not the point Paul himself makes here.

(2) The role of vv. 9-11 is divine eschatological vindication, not unlike the argument of 3:17-21 (perhaps 3:2-11 as well). However we are finally to understand the complex argument of chapter 3, one can scarcely deny Paul's concern to emphasize that "knowing Christ" in the present includes both the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, and that for those who so know Christ there is a certain future, which they have not yet attained. The present fellowship of his sufferings awaits final vindication at Jesus' coming, when this body of *ταπείνωσις* is transformed into the likeness of his present glory. So with the present argument, which seems in this regard to anticipate the argument of chapter 3. At the

[p.39]

same time, as Wright has suggested,³⁴ this final inferential sentence serves as the divine approval of the way Jesus demonstrated what it meant to be τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ.

IV. HOW THEN SHALL WE VIEW THE WHOLE? A PROPOSAL

In what follows I do not contend that I have discovered anything new as to the meaning of the passage in its context. Rather what is offered in the rest of this paper is a modest proposal for viewing the whole of the passage. What is proposed is that instead of looking for strophes, lines, parallels, etc., all of which is the result of faulty presuppositions in approaching the text, one should begin with the actual structures of Paul's Greek sentences and see how he himself is arguing (for what follows see the structural analysis in Appendix II).

First, let us begin with the obvious, that on which almost everyone agrees, namely that the whole is in two parts, the transition being signalled by the *διό καί* of v. 9: vv. 6-8 express humiliation; vv. 9-11, exaltation.

³³ The closest thing to it might be 1 Thes 1:6, but even here it was in the Thessalonians' own reception of the gospel with joy and suffering, an experience that in one way is uniquely theirs but in other ways is like that of Jesus and Paul, that they became "imitators of us and of the Lord."

³⁴ Wright, "ἀπαγγέλλω," 350-52.

Part I has two sentences, controlled by the two main verbs accompanied by the reflexive pronoun:

- v. 7—ἐαυτόν ἐκένωσεν
v. 8—ἐταπείνωσεν ἐαυτόν

The two parts pick up respectively how Christ thought/behaved in both expressions of his existence:

- (1) ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ—as the pre-existent one
(2) μορφήν δούλου—during his incarnation³⁵

Thus Part I¹ is syntactically balanced, though not perfectly:

Participial phrase	
Contrasting clause	(οὐκ)
Main clause	(ἀλλά)
Participial phrase	
Participial phrase	(γενόμενος). ³⁶

[p.40]

In Part I^{1a}, with a participle preceding, Paul begins by stating how Christ did not think (οὐχ ἡγήσατο) in his pre-existence as God.³⁷ On the one hand, the present participle asserts that he had prior existence as God (ὕμάρχων = *being* ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ); on the other hand, the οὐχ ἡγήσατο tells us how he did not treat his deity,³⁸ with an eye, of course, to his incarnation that follows.

Part I^{1b} then starts with the main clause, thus keeping the οὐ / ἀλλά contrast together, and asserts what he *did* do instead (become incarnate), followed by two *explanatory* participial phrases.³⁹ Three notes need to be made about structure and interpretation: (1) The ἀλλά ἐκένωσεν must be held in contrast to οὐχ ἡγήσατο as its opposite in some way. This is a

³⁵ The choice of μορφῇ almost certainly has nothing to do with the long debates over its fine nuances, but rather was chosen precisely because Paul needed a word that would fit both modes of Jesus' existence.

³⁶ Gloer, "Homologies," 132, lists the use of participles as one of the criteria for hymnic material. But these same participles appear in the apparently homological material found in Gal 4:4-6. As here, this passage may reflect Paul's dipping into the church's pool of creedal/homological material. But the sentences in their present form are Paul's; and the double γενόμενος, followed by the double ἵνα clauses reflect Paul's own skillful prose.

³⁷ One has great difficulty taking seriously the arguments of O'Connor, Talbert, Dunn (*Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980]), et al., who propose that this text does not speak to pre-existence, but to a kind of Adam-christology in which the Second Adam did not as Adam seek/hold onto divine privileges. Not only is the language and grammar against it, but such a view seems to miss the thrust of the passage by a long way.

³⁸ On the whole question of the meaning of the two key terms, ἀρπαγμός and ἐκένωσεν, see Wright, "ἀρπαγμός" (who follows R. W. Hoover on the meaning of this difficult word ["The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution," *HTR* 56 (1971) 95-119]). With Wright I am convinced that these words have not to do with grasping anything, but with the basic character of God, who is not a "grasping" being, but a "giving" one, best seen in Christ's pouring himself out. Thus, he did not "empty himself" of anything. The verb and its reflexive (which functions as the direct object, after all) simply describe his action.

³⁹ Cf. the very similar structure to the comparable "creedal" material in Gal 4:4-5.

typically Pauline way of setting up an argument, especially when he wants to emphasize the point of the ἀλλά- clause. (2) The first participial phrase in Part I^{1b} indicates *how* ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν; the λαβὼν is thus circumstantial/ modal (= "by" or "in"; "by / in having taken the form of a servant).⁴⁰ (3) The second participial phrase then elaborates/ clarifies the first; the emphasis is on servanthood, which finds its expression in his taking on humanity.⁴¹

Part I² then picks up the reality of the Incarnation and spells out how Christ behaved (what he did) while μορφῇ δούλου. The basic structure is similar to Part I¹: after a paratactic καί which joins the two clauses,⁴² it also begins with a participial phrase, now stressing

[p.41]

his humanity, followed by the main verb, which in turn is followed by a circumstantial /modal γενόμενος participial phrase. But there are also three notable differences: (1) This sentence lacks an οὐ / ἀλλά contrast; (2) the word order of the participles in their respective phrases is irregular; and (3) in place of the second (final) qualifying participle, there is a simple, but powerful, appositional coda. Thus:

καί (joining the two sentences [parts] of Part 1)

Participial phrase

Main clause

Participial phrase (γενόμενος)
(with coda)

Several notes need to be made here about structure and interpretation: (1) The opening participial phrase noticeably flows directly out of the last phrase of I^{1b}, picking up the key word ἄνθρωπος, but now emphasizing not just his having come in the ὁμοιώματι of ἄνθρωπος, but in fact his having been found σχήματι as ἄνθρωπος. (2) At the same time this phrase intentionally corresponds to the opening phrase of Part I, the operative words being θεός and ἄνθρωπος. This structural phenomenon, it seems to me, is the clear evidence that any attempt to make the two ἄνθρωπος phrases into a single stanza of an alleged hymn is thoroughly misguided. (3) The main clause similarly corresponds to the main clause of Part 1. Thus as God, he emptied himself (poured himself out); as man, he humbled himself. These

⁴⁰ Cf. Paul D. Feinberg, "The Kenosis and Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Analysis of Phil 2:6-11," *TrinJ* 1 NS (1980) 21-46 (p. 42).

⁴¹ These two aorist participles, it should be pointed out, which stand in contrast to ὑπάρχων (note their final position in each case, which does not occur in the next section), seem to spell death to all attempts to see I^{1a} as an Adam-analogy, at least in the human/human sense (See n. 37).

⁴² One of the weaknesses of many of the alleged strophic reconstructions of this passage is the choice on the part of some to disregard the clear force of this καί as parataxis, which joins the first two sentences together, and to make it a conjunction joining the two lines ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων and σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος. Such a reconstruction has every possible thing against it. (1) There is a sparing use of conjunctions in the passage; those that do occur join clauses, not phrases; (2) in a series of sentences that are full of Semitic coloring, the καί is normal parataxis; (3) one can make almost no sense at all of εὑρεθεὶς as modifying ἐκένωσεν (To say "He poured himself out, by having taken the form of a servant, by having come to be in the likeness of men and by having been found in appearance as a man," and then to start the next sentence, "He humbled himself by having become obedient unto death," is to talk syntactical nonsense). Finally, since Paul himself *did not write in strophes*, one should first understand Paul's sentences in their normal syntactical arrangements.

two clauses thus express the main concern of the passage as a whole. (4) The γενόμενος participial phrase, also as in Part 1, is circumstantial/modal, indicating how ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν, by his having become obedient to the point of death. (5) Finally, and again as in Part I, only now with an appositional phrase rather than a participle, the final phrase elaborates the preceding participle by indicating the kind of death (which is full of theological grist, of a kind which one can be sure the Philippians knew well; cf. esp. 3:10).

Thus all of this is not so much "hymnic" as it is full of the kinds of balanced structures found everywhere in Paul. That it should be

[p.42]

expressed in such exalted language, and in language that tends to be somewhat unique to this passage, probably is an indicator of how much of Paul we do not know from his preserved literary remains. What needs to be noted is that such "unique language" occurs in every instance of this kind in Paul, where he seems to dip into his own, and the church's, creedal/liturgical pool to express himself soteriologically or christologically—and no two are alike!⁴³

Finally, it must be insisted that Part II has nothing of the quality of a hymn to it, nor much in the way of the balanced structures of Part I. In fact it is a single complex sentence with a main clause, a compound ἵνα-clause, the latter of which concludes with a noun clause. The structure is easily displayed; a few additional words are in order about structure and meaning:

(1) It begins with διό, an inferential conjunction, which when joined with καί denotes "that the inference is self-evident" (BAGD). This a thoroughly Pauline expression, and belongs to argumentation, not poetry.

(2) In contrast to Part I, where Ἰησοῦς, by way of the relative ὅς is the subject of every verb form, here Jesus is the object (direct or indirect) of the verbs, and ὁ θεός is the subject of the sentence (the main clause), as the one who bestows "the name" on Jesus. The cosmic response (heavenly / earthly) to Jesus—every knee and every tongue—is the grammatical subject of the purpose / result clause, with Jesus as the "object" of worship.

(3) Thus God the Father's action (v. 11) is twofold, both probably referring to the same basic reality: (a) God highly exalted Jesus; and (b) he did so by bestowing on him an exalted name.

(4) The ἵνα-clause expresses purpose or result, with regard to his exalted name, and is also twofold (i.e., two ways of speaking of essentially the same reality): (a) Every knee shall bow (= expression of homage); (b) at the name of Jesus every tongue shall confess: κύριος is Ἰησοῦς Χριστός.

⁴³ These moments occur in all the preserved letters except Philemon. Cf. e.g., 1 Thes 1:9-10; 5:9-10; 2 Thes 2:13-14; 1 Cor 5:7; 6:11; 6:20; 15:3-5; 2 Cor 5:18-21; 8-9; Gal 1:4; 4:4-6; Rom 3:23-25; 4:24-25; Col 1:15-20; 1:21-22; 2:11-15; Eph 1:3-14; Phil 3:8-11; 3:20-21; 1 Tim 1:15; 2:4-5; 3:16; Titus 2:11-14,3:5-7; 2 Tim 1:9-10. One could easily show the "non-Pauline" character of all of these passages, since each of them has unique language and no two of them are alike. It is the very richness of these passages, and their obviously having been adapted to their contexts, that makes so much of the argumentation about the non-Pauline character of the present passage so tenuous.

(5) All of this is for (telic εἰς) God's ultimate glory.

There remain, then, two final structural notes about Part II, with regard to poetry. First, there is nothing like vv. 9-11 in any known Greek poetry; nor is there anything like it in the Hebrew Psalter.

[p.43]

(a) διό appears once (Ps 115[116]:1), but not in this kind of structural way (at the beginning of a new clause / sentence); (b) ἵνα (without μή) appears only twice (Ps 38[39]:4,13), and in both cases in prayer, not in descriptions of God.

Second, although this combination (διό ... ἵνα) as such does not occur in Paul, the form itself does (an inferential conjunction followed by a purpose/result clause = "therefore/so then ... in order that ...").⁴⁴ This combination is the language of argumentation, not of singing.

All of this is, then, to argue that the passage is not only Pauline, but is meaningful—and precise—in its present context. If it had prior form of some kind, and this can be neither proved nor disproved, although I would tend to lean in the latter direction, in its present form it has been so thoroughly taken over by Paul as to render discussions of its prior existence as to its form, authorship, and background needless or meaningless.

V. A THEOLOGICAL POSTSCRIPT

Let me conclude with a theological postscript, once again picking up the concern of Käsemann and Martin. To argue that this marvelous passage is written as a theological reinforcement for harmony or unity in an early Christian community does not make the passage unworthy of Paul or a betrayal of his gospel. What it does in fact is to reinforce a significant aspect of Paul's gospel, namely that there is no genuine *life in Christ* that is not at the same time, by the power of the Holy Spirit, being regularly transformed into the likeness of Christ. A gospel of grace that omits obedience is not Pauline in any sense. To be sure, the indicative must *precede* the imperative or all is lost; but it does not eliminate the imperative, or all is likewise lost.

The behavioral concern of this passage is precisely in keeping with the Pauline paraenesis found everywhere. Paul's gospel has inherent in it that those who are in Christ will also walk worthy of Christ (1:27). Thus, in Pauline ethics, the principle is love, the pattern is Christ, and the power is the Spirit, all of which have been provided for in the death and resurrection of Christ. The appeal in the present passage, which I take to begin at 1:27, is to a unity in Christ that for Paul was a *sine qua non* of the evidential reality of his gospel at work in his communities. The bases of the appeal, Christ, love, and the Spirit, were set forth in v. 1. The Christian graces absolutely necessary for such behavior are selflessness and humility, in

[p.44]

⁴⁴ See e.g., Rom 4:16 (διὰ τοῦτο... ἵνα); Rom 7:4 (ὥστε... εἰς τό); Gal 3:24 (ὥστε... ἵνα).

which one looks not only to one's own interests but also—especially—to those of others (vv. 3-4). Here is where the example of Christ comes in. Those who are "in Christ" (v. 1) must also "think" like him (vv. 5-11), which is exactly as Paul has argued elsewhere (2 Cor 8:9; Rom 15:1-6).

However, to insist that in context the basic thrust of this passage is "Christ as paradigm" does not mean that there are no other agenda. Both the length and pattern of the passage suggest that Paul is laying a much broader theological foundation, probably for the whole letter. In the first place, the mention of Christ's death on the cross, even though the emphasis lies on his "humbling himself" to that extent, surely at the same time reminds them of the basis of their faith in the first place. It is that death, after all, that lies at the heart of everything. To put that in another way, the appeal to Christ's *example* in his suffering and death makes its point precisely because it presupposes that they will simultaneously recall the saving significance of that death. In 1 Pet 2:21-25 that is explicitly stated. Paul does it differently; he does not add, "by whose stripes you were healed," but such an intent almost certainly lies behind his mention of the cross.

Secondly, there is also an emphasis in this letter on imitatio with regard to suffering (1:29-30; 3:10, 21). Those who are privileged to believe in Christ are also privileged to suffer for him; indeed to share in those sufferings is part of knowing him. Hence, this passage, with Christ's humbling himself to the point of death on the cross, will also serve as the theological ground for that concern. Indeed, that seems to make the best sense of the otherwise unusual emphasis in 3:10 that knowing Christ includes the "fellowship (κοινωνία) of his sufferings, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ)." That certainly sounds as if Christ's death is once again serving as paradigm. There is both "participation" and "following" implied here.

Thirdly, the note of eschatological reward or vindication in vv. 9-11 is also struck more than once in this letter (1:6; 1:10-11; 1:21-23; 3:11-14; 3:20-21). For this, too, Christ serves both as exalted Lord and as example or forerunner. His vindication, which followed his humiliation, is found in his present and future lordship, to which both the Philippians and their opponents will ultimately bow. But that vindication also becomes paradigm. Those who now suffer for Christ, and walk worthy of Christ, shall also at his coming be transformed so as to be conformed to "the body of his (present) glory."

Thus the centrality of Christ in Pauline theology. His death secured redemption for his people; but at the same time it serves as pattern for their present life in the Spirit, while finally we shall share in the eschatological glory and likeness that are presently his. And

[p.45]

all of this is, as our present passage concludes, "to the glory of God the Father."

In the final analysis, therefore, this passage stands at the heart of Paul's understanding of God himself. Christ serves as pattern, to be sure; but he does so as the one who most truly expresses God's nature. As God, Christ poured himself out, not seeking his own advantage. As man, in his incarnation, he humbled himself unto death on the cross. That this is what God is like is the underlying Pauline point; and since God is in process of recreating us in his image, this becomes the heart of the present appeal. The Philippians—and ourselves—are not

called upon simply to "imitate God" by what we do, but to have this very mind, the mind of Christ, developed in us, so that we too bear God's image in our attitudes and relationships within the Christian community—and beyond.

APPENDIX 1

THE NA²⁶ STRUCTURAL DISPLAY OF PHIL 2:6-11

- 6 (a) ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων
(b) οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγάγατο
(c) τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ,
7 (a) ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν
(b) μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν,
(c) ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος·
(d) καὶ σήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος
8 (a) ἑταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν
(b) γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου,
(c) θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.
9 (a) διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν
(b) καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα,
(c) τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα
10 (a) ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ
(b) πᾶν γόνυ κάμψῃ
(c) ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων
11 (a) καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι
(b) κύριος Ἰησοῦ Χριστὸς
(c) εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.

[p.46]

APPENDIX 2

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF PHIL 2:5-11

- 5 τοῦτο φρονεῖτε
 ἐν ὑμῖν
 ὁ καὶ
 ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ
6 [Part I]
 I^{1a} ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων
 οὐχ ἄρπαμὸν ἠγάγατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ
 I^{1b} ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν
 μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν,
 ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος.

8 I² καὶ
 σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν
γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου
θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.

9 [Part II]

διὸ καὶ
ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν
καὶ
ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα
10 τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα

10

ἵνα
ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ
πᾶν γόνυ κάμψῃ
ἐπουρανίων
καὶ
ἐπιγείων
καὶ
καταχθονίων

11

καὶ
πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται
ὅτι
κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.

© 1992 *Bulletin for Biblical Research*. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in November 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
