

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR UNDERSTANDING CHRISTOLOGY IN PAULINE WRITINGS

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Abstract

Philippians 2:5-11 is a profound pericope that has been debated and interpreted in various ways. Some scholars on one hand have suggested that the passage may have been an early hymn or poetic creed in ancient worship. Other scholars on the other hand have argued that the passage highlights the mystery of Christ's incarnation, self-emptying humility, and his ultimate exaltation. The purpose of the study is to investigate the significance of Philippians 2:5–11 for understanding the nature of Christ in Pauline's writings. The exegetical study method and document analysis were employed by the author to conduct the research. The findings show that irrespective of which divide one belongs in the debate, certainly, the text remains central to the understanding of Christology in Philippians, his incarnation, his obedience, and exaltation, which remains relevant to the Christian faith in 21st-century Christianity.

Keywords: Christ's incarnation, humility, obedience, and exaltation

Introduction

Philippians 2:5–11 is a profound passage on Christology in the New Testament. Charles Horne argues that in the pericope the writer encourages believers to a life of humility that does not seek its interest. Immediately after that "he sets forth Christ as the supreme example of such a life" [vv. 5–11] (37). He confesses that this book section "is not without interpretive difficulties" (37). Similarly, L. D. Hurst admits that Philippians 2:5–11 is one of the most contentious passages in the history of New Testament interpretation (449). "Certainly Philippians 2:5–11 is one of the most theologically significant passages in the New Testament and also one of the most debated" (Aune 15).

Many scholars have called this pericope "the Christ-hymn of the Philippians" (Marshall 104). For instance, Tony Merida and Francis Chan consider Philippians 2:5–11 to be one of the most astonishing passages in the Bible and that the pericope appears to be an early hymn or poetic creed that was possibly utilized liturgically in ancient worship (104). Hurst holds that a recent

debate has largely focused on its purported “hymnic” structure, whether or not the hymn is “pre-Pauline,” and what myth or character from antiquity served as its inspiration (449). For instance, Merida and Chan further state that some scholars contend that the hymn was composed by the early Jewish community of Jerusalem and sung during the Lord’s Supper (104). They advance their view that this passage seems to have a unified structure, beginning with God in eternity and ending in the same way. This structure hinges on v. 8 as having a V-shape with v. 8 being the bottom angle – “even death on the cross” (104). Humility is one of the numerous outstanding qualities of Christ that many scholars have emphasized which Christians and leaders today should emulate. Not many scholars have seen the humility of Christ as emphasized in this pericope as a leadership model in today’s period. In this study, therefore, attention is focused on the mystery of Christ’s incarnation, self-emptying humility, and ultimate exaltation as well as how Christ’s humility serves as a leadership model in today’s generation.

Text and Translation

Philippians 2:5–11

5 τοῦτο φρονεῖτε (*V-PAImp-2P*) ἐν ὑμῖν (*Loc of Sphere*) ὁ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*Loc of Sphere*),⁶ ὃς ἐν μορφῇ (*Inst of Manner*) θεοῦ ὑπάρχων (*V-PAPt-NMS*) οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο (*V-AMI-3S*) τὸ εἶναι (*V-PAInf*) ἴσα θεῷ, ⁷ ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (*V-AAI-3S*) μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν (*V-AAPt-NMS*), ἐν ὁμοιώματι (*Inst of Manner*) ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος (*V-AMPt-NMS*)· καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς (*V-APPt-NMS*) ὡς ἄνθρωπος ⁸ ἐταπείνωσεν (*V-AAI-3S*) ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος (*V-AMPt-NMS*) ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ (*Gen. of production*). ⁹ διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν (*V-AAI-3S*) καὶ ἐχαρίσατο (*V-AMI-3S*) αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομα (*Adv Acc of Comparison*), ¹⁰ ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι (*Inst of Means*) Ἰησοῦ πάντων γόνυ κάμψῃ ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων ¹¹ καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσῃται (*V-AMS-3S*) ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν (*Adv Acc of Reference*) θεοῦ πατρὸς (*USB5*).

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:⁶who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to

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, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (NIV).

Exegetical Comment

Merida and Chan assert, “This text is both doctrinal and ethical in nature” (104). It is doctrinal in that it highlights in a summary form Christ’s pre-existing nature, his incarnation in a bodily form of men. This is also ethical because it calls on Christians to emulate the life of humility and obedience demonstrated and set forth as a perfect example by the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 5). Christ’s incarnation is to set a standard that implies that if he is divine and humbles himself to live as a man, then man will have no excuse not to live up to the expectations and in the interest of others. Christ’s entire life was characterized by humility. The ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ is a locative of a sphere, a view that Gordon Fee affirms and alludes to as the common sphere of Christian existence (37). He again, thinks that the emphasis of this text is not on Christ’s humility (vv. 6–8), but on Christ’s triumph and exaltation [vv. 9–11] (37).

David MacLeod states that “the demonstrative τοῦτο (‘this’) in v. 5 points back to vv. 1–4” (310). The translation committee assigns a B-rating to the textual variant (τοῦτο), implying that the word in the text is almost certain that it does exist. This variant receives the support of some major manuscripts like Sinaiticus corrected of the 4th century, Alexandrinus of the 5th century, and Vaticanus of the 4th century, among others. Other manuscripts like P⁴⁶, the Western manuscript – codex Bezae (D) of 5th century etc., support τοῦτο γὰρ rendition. Bruce Metzger argues, “A majority of Committee was persuaded that, if γὰρ were present originally, no good reason can be found for its deletion” (545). He further states that a syntactical disruption in the structure of the text that resulted in “τοῦτο standing alone seems to cry out for a connective, whether γὰρ, or οὖν or καὶ [each of which is found in a variety of witnesses]” (545).

Verse 6 stresses the deity of Jesus who being in the form and quality of God, did not consider to be equal with God something to be grasped. Horne rightly observes that the personal relative pronoun ὃς in the verse refers back to its antecedent, “Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ” in v. 5 (37). He further asserts that one of the crucial concepts in the passage is “μορφῇ” (37). MacLeod on the other hand claims that “the meaning of the phrase ‘the form of God’ is highly debated” (313). Notice that

ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ is an instrument of manner. But then what exactly does it mean to be “in the form of God?” For Horne, grammatically, the phrase “in the form of God” might be understood as either a single or double predication but certainly cannot be taken in a physical sense since God is Spirit (John 4:24) (37).

Alva McClain argues, “μορφῇ - form is something intrinsic and essential as opposed to σχημα – form which is merely outward and more or less accidental” (90). To him, “the form of God” is a “reference to divine attributes” (92). On his part, MacLeod argues that μορφῇ in the text “refers to the ‘specific character’ or ‘nature’ of something. It speaks of ‘the essential nature’ of something or someone” (313). In essence, Christ possesses God’s essential nature and character, the basic qualities of deity, in His most fundamental self (MacLeod 314). This is to say that Jesus is God in essence, in being, eternity, and in the work he does and he is not limited in any way by anything that pertains to his divine attribute as the deity. MacLeod thinks that the phrase “to be equal with God” is closely connected to “in the form of God” (314). Wallace argues that there are two possibilities to translate the participle ὑπάρχων; either “causal” or “concession.” If ὑπάρχων is “causal,” it is translated as “who because he existed in the form of God...” but if “concessive,” it means “who, although he existed in the form of God....” But he concluded that concession fits in well considering its relationship with the use of other participles in the context (634–35). MacLeod articulates this in his expression thus, “‘The form of God’ (μορφῇ θεοῦ) speaks of his essence or nature as Deity, that is, his attributes, whereas ‘equality with God’ (τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ) speaks of the glories or ‘prerogatives’ of Deity. ‘Form of God’ refers to Deity; ‘equality with God’ speaks of the honors pertaining to that state” (315).

Another phrase that has generated a lot of discussions is ἀλλὰ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (but emptied himself). There are arguments for and against the literal and metaphorical usage of the phrase. MacLeod argues against the literal view when he asserts that to believe that Christ emptied himself of the “form of God,” means, He emptied himself of his attributes of deity. This view will not only be doctrinally wrong but will be exegetically and logically speaking impossible. To say that because Christ emptied himself of his divine attributes is simply to conclude that he ceased to be God is of course unreasonable and is in error (315–16). Carl Holladay correctly cited Karl Barth to argue that “God is always God even in his humiliation.... He humbled himself, but he did not do it by ceasing to be who he is” (576). It is therefore, the correct view to believe that Christ emptied

himself of “equality with God” (τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ), in the sense of emptying himself of the prerogatives of a deity just as MacLeod puts it, “He stripped himself of all privilege” (318). Still, he is always and will always remain God by every standard. In a similar view, Tokunboh Adeyemo asserts that Jesus’ humility “was not a one-time act but was spread over his entire life, from his birth in the manger to its climax on the cross” (1469). Timothy Moore stresses, “Jesus decided not to exploit his privilege. Instead, he gave it up to be one with us so that we might become like him” (121). Similarly, Treptow affirms this view by citing BDAG suggesting that the meaning of ἐκένωσεν in this context is that Christ “emptied himself, divested himself of his prestige or privileges” (127). For Adeyemo,

In accepting humiliation, Christ held nothing back: he made himself nothing (NIV) or emptied himself (NRSV) (2:7). This does not mean that he divested himself of such divine attributes as omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence, for he could still say ‘I and the Father are one’ (John 10:30). The ‘nothing’ focuses on his status rather than his essence. It means that he completely abandoned all the rights and privileges to which he was entitled (1469).

Daniel Wallace refers to the article τὸ as anaphoric (previous reference) referring back to μορφῇ θεοῦ (217, 220). MacLeod articulates the metaphorical usage of this phrase thus, “Christ ‘poured out himself,’ that is, he put himself totally at the disposal of people (cf. 1 John 3:16). He became poor that he might make many rich (2 Cor. 8:9; cf. Eph. 1:23; 4:10). ‘The emptying denotes taking on a new, lower status.’ He emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave” (318–19). Logically speaking, “Christ exchanged the rich and glorious mode of existence of heaven for an infinitely lower and poorer mode of existence. When a rich man becomes poor, his manner of existence is changed, but not his nature as a person” (MacLeod 320).

Similarly, MacLeod further holds that Thomas Aquinas correctly states, “He emptied Himself, not by laying down the divine nature, but by taking human nature.” He also cited Augustine, saying, “Thus he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, not losing the form of God. The form of a servant was added; the form of God did not pass away” (319). Stephen Wellum puts it unambiguously, “One cannot think of the identity of Jesus apart from him being fully God and fully man” (35). Wallace refers to λαβών (by taking on the form of a servant) in v 7 as a participial that “indicates means [by means of] by which the

action of a finite verb is accomplished” (628–30). Commenting on v 7, Metzger states that instead of ἀνθρώπων some early manuscripts such as P⁴⁶, Syriac, and some other external witnesses used ἀνθρώπου (545). He goes further to add that although the passage’s implicit Adam-Christ typology may explain substitution, it’s more likely that the single number is just a non-doctrinal conformity to the singular δούλου and the subsequent ἀνθρώπος (545–46).

Taking the form of a servant translates to the degree of humility demonstrated by Jesus Christ. And that was not all but he became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross, “the lowest stage of humiliation possible” (MacLeod 329). Death on the cross is the worst kind of death one could ever imagine. Adeyemo pointed out that Cicero, a Roman writer, described death on the cross as “the most wretched of deaths” (1469). This “form of execution was typically reserved for slaves and criminals” in the Roman world (Gray 9–10). Meanwhile, to a Jew, death by “crucifixion implied that the victim was excommunicated and outside the covenant of the people of God, because ‘anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse’ [Deut 21:23]” (Adeyemo 1469). Wallace states that θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ (even the death of a cross) could be a “genitive of means” thus, “death by means of a cross” or genitive of place; thus, “death on a cross.” It could even be taken as a genitive of production which seems to bring out the force of the thought of the author better especially with the use of deV (even) which tends to make the statement emphatic and fits in well; thus, “death produced by, brought about by a cross” (105, 124–25). Wellum stresses this when he re-echoes the point that the context of this pericope “itself interprets the ‘emptying’ as equivalent to ‘humbling himself’ and taking on a lowly status and position by becoming human and by choosing to die on a cross for us (v. 8)” (34). Wellum points out that of course, the trajectory is not over yet. Although the majesty of the Son was obscured by his flesh during the incarnation and on the cross, this notion of its concealment is merely a product of the human perspective (35). For Merida and Chan, “Christ didn’t empty himself literally of his deity, but figuratively.... Jesus didn’t relinquish his deity; he surrendered his rights and prerogatives” as God (111).

The passage concludes with the eventual existence of Christ in exaltation (vv. 9–11). The passage ends where it began, with the Son exalted in the heavens, but now every knee will bow – not just in heaven, but also on earth; and every tongue will confess – not that God is Lord, but that Jesus Christ is Lord. Wellum maintains that vv. 9–11 emphasize that it is exactly because of Jesus’ obedience

that the Father now vindicates him by exalting him to the highest position, God's heavenly throne, and "God bestows on Christ the name above all names, which is his own name, Yahweh" (35–36). George Wilson noted how dangerous it was for the early-century Christians who lived during the imperial power to declare the name "Lord" except for the Roman emperor (247). Merida and Chan state, "To hear that someone other than Caesar is Lord would be shocking" (116). And again, "To confess Jesus as Lord in the first century meant that Caesar was not Lord. And as a result of such confessions, many were persecuted and killed" (Merida and Chan 117). Wilson holds that the followers who sang that hymn were living under an imperial order whose supreme leader claimed for himself – solely – the title "Lord." To claim such sovereignty for anyone else was not merely audacious, it was subversive (247). Sean Emslie asserts, "The declaration of Yeshua's lordship was a statement in direct defiance to the emperor cult and the honor due to Nero as the Roman emperor" (72). Teptow elaborately states,

God graciously gave the incarnate Christ the name above all names, the greatest reputation and the highest honor as the world's Redeemer. He κύριος, the only true God. By the time Paul wrote this letter to the saints in Philippi, the title κύριος; was being used to refer to the Roman emperor. 'In a Roman colony,'... 'Philippians would hear the acclamation that Jesus is Lord as a shocking allusion to the declaration of the Roman imperial cult that Caesar is Lord.'... God has assigned to Jesus the highest in honors specifically because of the manner in which Jesus chose to use the power at his disposal. And God's unique position at the apex of the social pyramid guarantees both the efficacy of his grant of honor and the public acknowledgment of Jesus's exalted status on the part of all created beings (133).

The variant in v 9 τὸ ὄνομα receives a B rating in textual commentary on Commentary on the Greek New Testament by Metzger (546), signifying that the text is almost certain. τὸ ὄνομα variant reading is supported by P⁴⁶, Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, etc. Metzger observes that the article τοῦ is not found in the Textus Receptus and some other manuscripts which to some it is an impression that Jesus was given an unspecified name but considered to be above every name in power and dignity (546). However, he further notes that the omission of the article by some manuscripts could have been possible with the presence of the last syllable of ἐχαρίσατο (546).

The purpose of Christ's exaltation is "that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord ..." According to Horns, "In scope this confession is universal" (42). He submits that in his name, every knee and every tongue - whether they are celestial, terrestrial, or infernal must bow in submission to the Lordship of Christ and confess that Jesus is Lord (42). The variant "κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός" in v. 11 has an A rating indicating that the text is certain. It enjoys the support of some major witnesses including P⁴⁶, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, etc. Metzger holds that several witnesses, mostly Western, omit Χριστός, possibly to conform the expression to what is in v. 10 (546).

Significance of Philippians 2:5–11 for Understanding Christology in Pauline Writings

Jesus' great leadership example has never been in doubt and will not be in doubt whatsoever. Paul in his writings has always extolled the leadership qualities and style of Jesus Christ and made bold to call on all to, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Understanding Christ in the Pauline writings, especially in the context of Philippians 2:5–11 is a task for all Christians and leaders of great minds. John chapters 10 and 13 are some of the great passages in the Bible that demonstrate the kind of leadership style and model that Jesus offers to his followers but the degree of humility exemplified by Christ in Philippians 2 is second to none. In this passage, Christ did not only serve man but died for him. Paul points out that Jesus dying on the cross is the ultimate way through which man is reconciled to God and the greatest gift that is propelled by love that one can offer another.

It is a common expression that "the way up is down." This assertion is true. Jesus' demonstration of "downward mobility" (humility) has an enormous impact on an individual, the church, and society. Christ's humility demonstrates unequivocally that "humility precedes and leads to honor and glory" (Adeyemo, 1471) which Christians are called upon to emulate. Adeyemo correctly captures the significance of this pericope in the following manner,

Had all our church leaders followed the way of Christ's humility instead of holding onto their powers and positions, the present decline in our churches could have been avoided. Had our civil leaders followed the way of humility instead of setting out to grasp power by any means, we would have seen abundant peace and prosperity in

our societies. The way to peace, glory and eventual success is the way of humility, setting aside our selfish interests for the sake of communal gain (1471).

Corroborating this view, David Gray thinks the “model of leadership propagated in Paul’s letters to the Philippians is a valid model leadership study and application” (4). Paul presents Christ as a role model to his followers and by extension to all men through his humility. Gray goes further to state that the poetic recitation of the story of Christ “serves as a compelling example of how the Philippians should seek to serve each other as well as others outside the church” (5). Nothing is better for Christians than longing to have the mind of Christ which is demonstrated in genuine love and humility. The model of Christ’s leadership and that of Paul presented in Paul’s writings in the New Testament “stands in stark contrast to the recent revelations of greed and avarice among noted televangelists” of the 21st century time (Gray 8). The message of humility and servitude in Philippians 2 is consistent with Paul’s writings and other New Testament books. The point is that humility pays in whatever capacity especially in leadership. Jesus humbles himself to the lowest point one can think of and he is exalted over and above all in the universe “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that he is Lord,[and not Caesar] to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10–11). This is a great model of leadership for all people especially, the spiritual leaders. Jesus’ leadership qualities among which is humility sets and encourages a high moral standard of an effective servant-leader.

Conclusion

Christ willingly humbled himself to the lowest position ever leaving behind a grand example for believers and leaders to follow. Remember, “The way up is down!” Hence, humility is the way up to a marvelous exaltation. Christ is an example of one who emptied his glory and became poor for his followers to receive glory and be rich. God the Father receives glory, joy, and honor from Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation (Merida and Chan 117). Fee captures it all when he states, “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” (45). Christians are to be Christ’s ambassadors in all works of life. Making sacrifices for

the good of others just like the Master Jesus Christ is the way to go for all Christians.

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