

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW OF:

A HYMN OF CHRIST

*PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 IN RECENT INTERPRETATION
& IN THE SETTING OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP*

SUBMITTED TO

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IT 638: ADVANCED HERMENEUTICS & BIBLICAL CRITICISM

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JULY 16, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Philippians 2:5-11 has provoked thought and argument for nearly two millennia. It is certainly one of the most challenging passages of scripture, in either the Old Testament or the New. Ralph Martin (distinguished scholar in residence at Fuller Theological Seminary) seeks to investigate critically the form, setting and content of this passage in light of recent scholarship. The primary purpose of the book is to investigate the meaning of the hymn in the epistolary context of Paul's letter. The book is highly technical and relies heavily on the reader's knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, German and Latin. The intended audience is obviously academic.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Traces of Carmina in the New Testament

Martin begins his analysis by illustrating the fact that there has been a long history of hymns and songs among the people of God. Many references in the New Testament point to this fact, and there are numerous examples of Greek and Hebrew antecedents to these hymns.¹ As we search for evidence of hymns in the New Testament, we can turn to passages which demonstrate their existence, such as 1 Cor. 14:26, Col. 3:16, and Eph. 5:19-20. Each of these passages refer to "hymns" (ὕμνος), which were sung in the respective congregations. There are also numerous scriptural passages which can be described as hymns. Among these are those which can be categorized as sacramental,

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 18.

meditative, confessional, and Christological.² The Philippians 2:6-11 passage is one of these, and is thought of as one of the more difficult passages in the New Testament. Although the body of opinion on this passage expresses great diversity of thought, the importance of this passage is undisputed.

Philippians 2:5-11: Its Literary Form

Many scholars have sought to classify the Philippians text and identify its poetic structure. Foremost among these scholars was E. Lohmeyer, who proposed that “what we have in these verses is a Christological hymn set in rhythmical form and composed of six strophs, each with three lines.”³ Among the other important traits identified by Lohmeyer: a) the verses formed a self-contained unity, b) it has the appearance of being a studied composition with a definite progression and climax of theme, c) the linguistic and stylistic evidence goes to show that the hymn was both pre-Pauline and a product of a Jewish-Christian community, and d) the Jewish-Christian community which is credited with composing the hymn is located in Jerusalem.⁴ Other scholars, including M. Dibelius and J. Jeremias argued for a different lyrical arrangement of the text.

Philippians 2:5-11: Its Authorship

Aside from the literary evidence, there is strong contextual evidence that Phil. 2:5-11 is detachable from the rest of Paul’s letter. First, there is the stylistic evidence, which would suggest a liturgical use, rather than epistolary prose. Verses 5-11 clearly

² Ibid., 19.

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ Ibid., 26-28.

interrupt the Paul's hortatory theme.⁵ Secondly, there is linguistic evidence that these verses have origin outside of Paul. The form of the verses (the participial style) is foreign to Paul, the language and themes are different, and the portrayal of Christ as the "Servant of Yahweh" are non-Pauline. Other scholars disagree, and offer evidence that the passage is Pauline in origin.

Philippians 2:5-11: Main Lines of Twentieth Century Interpretation

There have been many different interpretations of the Philippians text over the recent century. Phil 2:6-7 in the NRSV reads "[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." In the early 20th century, the Lutherans proposed that the text refers to events which took place during the course of Jesus' earthly life.⁶ Later, proponents of the Kenosis theory would propose that Jesus completely divested himself of his divine qualities and powers in the Incarnation. Other scholars argue that the Philippians hymn is not concerned with teaching a particular doctrine of the Incarnation, but is simply giving an ethical example.

Later in the century, E. Lohmeyer traced the sources of the hymn to the Old Testament "Servant of Yahweh" passages. He also suggests that Paul borrowed from Iranian mythology in the formulation of the "Primal Man" teaching.⁷ M. Dibelius would later pick up on this line of reasoning and cited various pagan parallels to the hymn. Following the same line of thought, A. A. T. Ehrhardt and W. L. Knox proposed that the

⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ Ibid., 74.

passage is anchored in the world of Greek history and mythology. Finally, E. Schweizer sought to understand the hymn in the light of its setting in early Christianity.⁸

The Pre-Existent Being (Verse 6a)

Beginning the exegetical task in verse 5, Martin begins an analysis of the phrase “form of God” (μορφή Θεου). Unfortunately, this word appears only here in all of Paul’s writings. J. B. Lightfoot, writing on this passage in 1868, argues that the entire phrase points back to a time prior to the Incarnation, and that “form” refers more to a philosophical aspect than a perceptible reality.⁹ In contrast, Catholic scholar H. Schumacher interprets μορφή to be the equivalent of οὐσία, so that the text gives clear proof of the divinity of Christ. Studying the Septuagint, it is found that the usage of *morphe* has a general meaning in the Greek far removed from the metaphysical content used by Plato and Aristotle.¹⁰ So scholar Vincent Taylor would argue that *morphe* be interpreted rather as ‘condition’ or ‘state’ or even ‘stamp’. Other scholars compare this usage to related words in the Old Testament, which often refer to the concept of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’. O. Cullmann comes to the conclusion that μορφή is related to the concept εἰκῶν, since the Semitic root can refer to either of the two Greek words.¹¹ This leads to the conclusion that there is a close association of the terms ‘image’ and ‘glory’ used here. Jesus was the full expression and manifestation of the glory of God.

E. Lohmeyer’s treatment of this passage is notable in that he compares it with the Iranian myth of Gayomart. In this line of reasoning, the story of Christ is fit into a

⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹¹ Ibid., 108.

pattern already established. However, other scholars, such as E. Percy, have faulted this reasoning. Percy argues that the idea of a redeemer is unique to the Christ story.

Another source for the Philippians passage is the book of Genesis. C. H. Dodd argues that “Even if Iranian mythology gave an impetus to such speculations, the Ανθρωπος doctrine in its familiar Hellenistic forms owes much to direct reflection by Jewish thinkers and others influenced by them, upon the mysterious story of man’s origin told in Genesis, and possibly to more fantastic forms of that story handed down in Jewish tradition.”¹²

His Choice (Verse 6b, c)

The term ἀρπαγμός is one of the most challenging to understand in the entire New Testament. It occurs only once in the New Testament, and is not found in the Septuagint. Its usual definition is “the act of seizing, robbery”, but whether it is here in the active or passive sense is debated. J. Ross argues that an active sense could be understood as Paul saying that “Jesus did not think that to be on an equality with God spelt rapacity, plundering, self-aggrandizement. On the contrary, He voluntarily and gladly rejected the earthly idea of Messianism for the spiritual.”¹³ This active translation is rejected by most scholars, who prefer the passive form of the word. Therefore the translation is “a thing seized or to be seized”, and the idea is that the pre-incarnate Christ did not “hold onto” his equality with God, but became like a servant.

¹² Ibid., 128-129.

¹³ Ibid., 135.

His Incarnation (Verse 7a, b)

In the New Testament, the verb κενου̅ν is found only four times apart from the Phil. 2:7 reference. The literal meaning of the verb is “to empty, make empty” and in the Philippians text refers to the self-emptying of Christ. The first question that must be asked is what did Christ empty himself of?¹⁴ Some theologians who support the ‘Kenotic’ theory hold that it is the ‘form of God’ that Christ surrendered in the Incarnation. Others hold that it refers to a prize which Christ had not yet laid hold of. More recently, the theory that Christ emptied himself of his divinity has been abandoned, and instead the understanding is that it was the taking of a servant’s form that was the emptying itself.¹⁵ W. Michaelis argues that Christ’s becoming a “slave” does not refer to the Incarnation, but to Jesus’ obedience to the Father. Most scholars reject this, and hold that the *kenosis* of Christ is His incarnation.¹⁶

His Abasement (Verses 7c-8)

Ταπεινώ means “to make low, bring low” and in the Philippians passage has the sense of “to humble, to humiliate”. Used with the reflexive pronoun, it means ‘to humble oneself’. So Christ humbled himself and took the “likeness of men”, or ομοίωμα. There is a great deal of disagreement as to the meaning of ομοίωμα. J. Schneider argues that the basic meaning of ‘image, likeness’ can be applied.¹⁷ The question arises, however, as to what exactly it means that Christ took on the ‘image’. Did he become man completely, or simply in appearance as a man? Scholars such as Cerfaux, and F. W. Beare champion

¹⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁶ Ibid., 178.

¹⁷ Ibid., 200.

the interpretation that Christ became fully human and came into the world like the rest of humanity. Others, like Johannes Weiss, have argued that Christ's humanity was only a disguise, appropriate to the role which he played here.¹⁸

His Exaltation (Verse 9)

It is clear from the text that beginning in verse 9 a turning point in the story of the hymn has been reached.¹⁹ The story shifts from the actions of Christ to the actions of God the Father as the principal actor. J. Jervell argues that this contrast points to two different Christologies that the hymn holds together, one of Gnostic theology, and one of typical early Christology. However, as Michaelis and Kasemann point out, the divergent thoughts are successfully held together in the person of Christ.²⁰

The vindication of Christ is expressed by the bestowal of 'the name above all names'. Older commentators sought to discern the actual content of this name, although later commentators found the importance not in the name itself but in the fact that the Father gave it. In the name is the sense of power and authority which Christ obtained not by exploiting his privilege, but through obedience.

The Universal Homage (Verses 10-11a)

The final verses are devoted to the praise which Christ's name evokes. The universal scope of this adoration is indicated by the words 'every', as in 'every knee' and 'every tongue'. The reference to Isaiah 45:23, "Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear" is clear. What God had announced in Isaiah as a promise is

¹⁸ Ibid., 203.

¹⁹ Ibid., 229.

²⁰ Ibid., 230.

now, in this hymn, a reality. The phrase, ‘of heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth’ is represented in the Greek by three adjectives, which, in the view of Lightfoot, represents the whole universe of nature and men.²¹ This includes not only earthly beings, but as O. Cullmann points out, should include the angelic as well.

The Christological Confession (Verse 11b, c)

The hymn reaches its conclusion and climax in the utterance of the whole universe, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord.’ It seems clear that ‘Lord’ is the name referred to earlier in the verse as the name bestowed by the Father. There is some debate as to whether or not the phrase ‘to the glory of God the Father’ is original or added on later. Martin argues that “it seems conclusive that the phrase should be separated from the text of the confession, brought into the $\iota\nu\alpha$ -clause of the preceding lines, and regarded as a liturgical conclusion of the entire hymn.”²²

Philippians 2:5-11 in its First Century Setting

Martin’s final chapter addresses the use of the hymn in the early Christian community. The older view was that these verses were simply an integral part of the letter. As we have seen, this view is no longer tenable. Martin suggests that the hymn may have been used by the early Christian community in the context of baptism. Paul is thus admonishing the Philippians to adopt the highest way of life by recalling to them their standing in Christ.²³

²¹ Ibid., 257.

²² Ibid., 273.

²³ Ibid., 293.