

A “Preexistent” Jesus in Philippians 2:6-11?

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~ Introduction ~

(*KJV*) PHILIPPIANS 2:2-8, “Fill you up my joy that you esteem the same thing, possessing the same love, joined in soul, esteeming the one thing, nothing by way of faction, nothing by way of vain-glory, but in lowliness of mind accounting one another superior to yourselves, not looking to your own things, but to the things of each other. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. But emptied himself, taking a slave’s form, coming to be in men’s likeness; and being found in fashion as a man, humbled himself, becoming obedient as far as death, yea, death upon a cross.”

The orthodox interpretation of this passage is that Paul describes how Jesus in his preexistent state “emptied” himself of his divine prerogatives or attributes at the time of the “Incarnation,” when “God became a man.” In this way a Divine Jesus “humbled” himself by becoming a human being, though one indwelt by “God the Son.” The present tense of the Greek participle^[1] rendered “being” (*huparchōn*) is said to refer to his eternal existence prior to the Incarnation. The clause “form of God” then refers to his “divine nature,” to his being God. As proponents of this view write:

“Paul is not saying Jesus *ceased to be God*, or in any other way stopped being equal with the Father, but that He voluntarily laid aside the privileges as a glorious heavenly being, for His glory was hidden, veiled” (*italics in the original*).^[2]

“The descent of the Son from the heaven of heavens into the world of sin and shame followed by his glorious exaltation back to the heaven of heavens is powerfully dramatized by Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. Here the Son sets aside his eternal privileges and position with the Father and descends into the evil world for the salvation of mankind.”^[3]

But is preexistence or the divestiture of deity Paul’s point?

~ Conceptual & Theological Problems ~

Christians should carefully consider the ramifications of the traditional interpretation.

The notion of a deity who divests himself of his attributes and prerogatives is inherently problematic. Does this mean that Jesus ceased to be “God” when he became human? If God is eternal and changes not, how can He divest Himself of any part of the nature? Does this idea not contradict passages like MALACHI 3:6 (“I am Yahweh, I change not”)? How and when did he reacquire his “divine attributes?” What does all this imply about the death of Jesus? Did God actually die or did just a part of Jesus die on the cross? Or was the death of Jesus not a real death; did the man Christ just appear to die since in actuality God cannot die? Did this amount to a divine charade? Or did just the human body of Jesus die? If so, does this not mean that his human nature is impersonal? If only the human part(s) of Jesus died, what was the point of “God the Son” emptying himself of his divine attributes? And if the divestiture of deity and the death of Jesus involved only

“God the Son,” what are the implications for God the Father and “God the Holy Spirit?” Etc.

Are we prepared to accept the notion that God can become a man? How do we square this with scriptures like NUMBERS 23:19 and 1 SAMUEL 15:29 that state, “**God is not a man?**” And how can Christ’s unique act of “divesting” himself of his divine privileges to become human serve as a practical example for Christian humility? Can a Christian “divest” himself of his human attributes and take on an entirely different nature? How can this be paradigmatic for Christian conduct?

Finally, if Jesus is both human and divine, does this not make him some kind of hybrid? How can he in that case still be categorized as genuine human being? And if he not truly human, if he possesses powers or a nature that is more than human, how can he serve as an example for how humans are to live?

~ The Context ~

The basic proposition of Philippians is given in 1:27-30 where Paul exhorts this church to “be living worthy as citizens of the gospel of Christ, that whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear the things concerning you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one soul toiling together in the faith of the gospel, and not intimidated in anything by the opposers...for it is granted to you for Christ's sake not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake...” ***The epistle is a call for believers to live as proper “citizens” of the kingdom of God in the midst of a hostile world and to work together while doing so.*** It admonishes Christians to remain faithful even when suffering for Christ and provides insight into why they are to do so.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4 is Paul’s first appeal based on the letter’s call to behave as citizens of God’s kingdom. The passage in 2:5-11 is an example drawn from the life of Jesus to illustrate the appeal. Paul’s admonishment is for Christians to live out their kingdom citizenship by “thinking the same thing” as Christ ***by giving deference to one another***, to deny one’s own desires and “rights” for the sake of others, to put others before oneself. The pattern set by Jesus and described in verses 5-11 is the supreme example of this very thing.

Paul exhorts the Philippians to emulate the humility epitomized in the death of Jesus. This example is not portrayed as a “divestiture of divinity,” an “incarnation” or a “descent from heaven” (and the passage nowhere mentions or alludes to any “descent” from above), but ***as Christ’s willing submission and obedience to God even unto a shameful death of a slave on the cross.*** To focus on the supposed divestiture of deity or “incarnation” is to miss Paul’s point. To help illustrate Jesus’ example Paul weaves in Old Testament language and imagery from several scriptures. This serves to ***contrast Jesus with Adam and identify him with Isaiah’s Suffering Servant.*** At the end of his humiliation Jesus was highly exalted, not because he was previously divine or eternal and “returned to his previous glory,” but ***because he willingly went to a horrific death on the Cross.***

~ The Adamic Background ~

Adam was created in the image of God but grasped at divine “likeness” in the Garden when he ate the forbidden fruit. In contradistinction from Adam, Jesus chose to obey God and suffer the consequences, thus enduring horrific humiliation. As a consequence of his obedience God highly exalted him.

Verse 6 reads, “Who commencing in ***form of God*** did not consider ***being like God*** something for plunder.” The Greek adjective *isos* or “like” is in the dative case. It means “like,” not “equality with.”^[4] The clause “being like God” is a verbal allusion to GENESIS 3:5 (“For God knows that in the day you eat thereof your eyes will be opened and you will ***become like God*** knowing good and evil”). When confronted with a choice to obey or not, Adam chose disobedience and thereby attempted to “seize” the likeness of God. Paul

contrasts Adam's failure with the refusal of Jesus to disobey and grasp at God's likeness.

The reference to the "form of God" does not mean Jesus was God or divine. That notion is precluded by the genitive construction, "form of God." It means he was in "the form of God," not God Himself. This clause corresponds to the creation account in GENESIS 1:27 ("God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him"). Jesus was in the "image" or "form" of God (in Greek literature the two nouns are synonyms) just as Adam was in God's image from the beginning. This clause forms part of the contrast between Adam and Jesus.

In PHILIPPIANS 2:6 the *King James Version* translates the verb in the first clause as "being" ("**being** in the form of God"). Other translations use similar English words like "existed" or "existing." But the Greek word is a present tense participle meaning, to "commence, to begin, to start," not "to be, being or to exist" (Greek - *huparchō*). It does not indicate eternal existence prior to the "Incarnation." The clause simply means that Jesus **commenced** or **started** in the form or image of God just as Adam did.

In verse 6 the Greek noun rendered "seize" or "booty" is *harpagmos*, meaning, "plunder, booty." It is used to refer to **something that is seized by force**. Unlike Adam Jesus did not surrender to the temptation and attempt to seize equality or likeness with God.

~ The Image of the Suffering Servant ~

PHILIPPIANS 2:7-8 reads, "But he **poured himself out** taking the **form of a slave**, having come to be in likeness of men. And having been found in fashion as man, **he humbled himself** becoming obedient **unto death**, even death on a cross." In this passage are several verbal and conceptual allusions to the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah. Note the following correspondences between PHILIPPIANS 2:7-8 and the "Suffering Servant":

ISAIAH 53:12, "Therefore will I give him a portion in the great, and the strong shall he apportion as plunder, because **he poured out to death his own soul**, and with transgressors let himself be numbered, Yea, he the sin of many bare, and for transgressors interposes."

ISAIAH 49:5, "Now, therefore, says Yahweh, **forming** me from birth to be **slave** to him, to restore Jacob unto him, and that Israel unto him might be gathered."

ISAIAH 53:7, "Hard pressed, yet **he humbled himself**, nor opened his mouth, as a lamb to the slaughter is led."

In fulfillment of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" Jesus chose to humble himself even to the point of death rather than grasp at God's likeness. In this way "he poured himself out even unto death" in humble obedience to God.

The exaltation that followed Jesus' humiliation is described in PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11; "therefore also God **highly exalted him** and granted him the name that is above every name, that in the name of Jesus **every knee should bow**, of beings heavenly and earthly and under the earth, and **every tongue should confess**, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father, even God." Paul completes his picture by utilizing allusions to two more passages from Isaiah's so-called "Servant Songs." Note the following:

ISAIAH 52:13, "Behold, **my Servant** prospers, **he rises and is lifted up and becomes very high**."

ISAIAH 45:23, "By myself have I sworn, gone forth out of my mouth is righteousness as a decree and shall not turn back, that unto myself **shall bow every knee, shall swear every tongue**."

~ The Larger Context ~

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11 is a real life illustration of the appeal made in VERSES 1-5 drawn from the life of Christ. There are a number of conceptual and verbal parallels between verses 1-5 and 6-11. Note the following (parallels are in *Italics*, *red font* and *bold print*):

Verses 1-5:

- “(1) If, therefore, any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any partnership of spirit, if any affections and mercies,
- (2) Fulfill my joy that you *be thinking the same thing*,
Having the same love, of one mind, in unity *thinking the same thing*;
- (3) *Nothing according to self interest*,
Nothing according to empty glory;
But *with humility* be regarding one another surpassing yourselves,
- (4) Not each watching out for their own things,
But even everyone for the things of others.
- (5) Be thinking this among you, that even in Christ Jesus,

Verses 6-11:

- (6) Who commencing in form of God *regarded being like God not as plunder*,
- (7) *But emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, having come to be in likeness of men.
And having been found in fashion as man,
- (8) *He humbled himself* becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross.
- (9) Therefore also God highly exalted him and granted him the name that is above every name, (10)
That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow of beings heavenly and earthly and under the earth, (11) And every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, To the glory of the Father, even God.”

By emphasizing that Jesus died the death of a slave on a cross Paul may be playing up conceptions about crucifixion common in the Roman Empire. Crucifixion was a form of execution used primarily for rebellious slaves and political rebels. It was considered the most shameful form of death imaginable. So much so that by law Roman citizens could not be crucified (the normal means of execution for Roman citizens was beheading). The aspect of crucifixion that horrified Romans the most was the shame that was attached to crucifixion (the Roman world was an honor-shame culture).

Christians are called to have the same mind as Christ, to seek nothing out of “self interest” or for “empty glory.” They are to emulate Christ who did not seek to be “like God” or to exalt himself. Rather than grasp at “empty glory” Jesus “poured himself out” in humble obedience to his Father for the sake of others (in the translation above “empty” [verse 3] and “emptied” [verse 7] reflect a word play in the Greek). Believers are to conduct themselves in “humility” towards one another, just as Christ “humbled himself.” *That is Paul’s key point in this passage.*

~ Summary ~

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 is not Paul’s attempt to explain the “Incarnation” or how a divine being divested himself of his divine prerogatives. It is not an exposition about the preexistence of Christ. Instead Paul uses a real life example from the life of Jesus to illustrate his appeal for humility and mutual submission. To help fill out his illustration Paul brings in language and imagery from the Old Testament accounts of Adam and the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah. He does this to contrast the way of self-promotion (Adam) with the path of humble obedience and suffering (the “Suffering Servant”).

Like Adam Jesus was in the “form of God.” Unlike Adam he did not attempt to become “like God.” Instead he chose to deny himself his rights and took on the form of a servant. In obedience to his Father he embraced the shameful death of the cross rather than attempt to seize likeness with God. By following God’s designated path of obedience, Jesus “poured himself out” unto death, even a most shameful death on the cross. Because of his faithful obedience and humility God subsequently highly exalted him and gave him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and tongue confess that he is Lord.

ENDNOTES:

[1] **Participle**: a word having the characteristics of both verb and adjective including tense, voice, noun case, number and gender. A participle functions as an adjective with verbal features, and can take an object.

[2] James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), p. 125.

[3] Peter Toon, *Our Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), p. 216.

[4] Wesley Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksons Publishers, 1990), p. 210.