

## **PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11**

### **Rusty Rexius**

Jesus was a remarkable man; there is no debate about that. But for centuries, a debate has raged about why, exactly, he was remarkable. Was it, as Orthodox Trinitarianism suggests, because he was the incarnation of the Son, the second person of the Trinity, who humbled himself by coming down from heaven where he was co-existent and co-eternal with the Father (and the Holy Spirit) and took up residence in the human body of a humble servant, Jesus of Nazareth? Or was it for some other reason; a reason more relevant to our own experience? It could be that we should simply be struck by the willingness of Jesus to leave his place of glory and majesty, and empty himself by becoming a man. If that's right, then that's what we should do. But there is at least one other perspective that allows us to pay the respect, honor, glory and worship to Jesus that he is due, but not for the reasons this traditional view would suggest. How can this be? Philippians 2:5-11 will help us sort that out.

### **THE BACKGROUND**

Philippians itself is not a particularly controversial letter. Its place in the Canon has never really been questioned; virtually everyone understands it to have been written by the Apostle Paul (although there is some debate whether he wrote it from prison in Ephesus or from prison in Rome); all agree the audience is a group of Gentile believers that in all likelihood were the first of Paul's many converts as he began his missionary journeys in Macedonia. Neither is there a question that Paul writes this letter primarily to thank the Philippian believers for their financial support, as well as prepare them for the return of Epaphroditus. There certainly are some warnings, a little bit of discipline and some instruction, but by and large, this is a letter of affirmation and encouragement rather than correction and rebuke. It may be for that reason that Philippians is not often seen as one of the great theological books we go to to wrestle with the "really tough subjects".

That said, a proper understanding of what was going on in this thriving city at the time of Paul's writing is critical to understanding why Paul says what he says in the section we are interested in. Philippi sits atop the northern edge of the Mediterranean Sea just a bit inland. While it was not the capital city of Macedonia (Thessalonica enjoyed that status), it was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12), which meant its citizens were as though they were on Italian soil. This meant that they enjoyed all the privileges of being a native Roman including rights with respect to ownership of land, payment of taxes, local administration and law. Consequently, those who called Philippi their home did so with a great deal of pride and honor.

Economically, Philippi was a booming community. It sat squarely in the middle of Rome to the west and Asia to the east, and found itself as the central trade route between the two. With robust trade and busy commerce, Philippian citizens possessed a great deal of civic pride and were likely well-to-do. This actually makes a lot of sense considering one of the many things Paul praises the Philippian believers for is their financial support, as they "shared in his ministry" (Phil 4:15). Not surprisingly, as we would see even today, being wealthy and important leaves one with a certain degree of expectation about how others should both perceive and treat one with such status. It's safe to say the Philippians walked with their heads held high and their noses slightly tilted upwards.

The introduction to Philippi and its residents in the book of Acts (6:11-40) is important to understanding, at least in part, the situation that Paul was writing into several years later in his letter to the Philippians. Paul's arrival in this Macedonian city was his first stop and interaction with the Gentile world. What he found besides the hustle and bustle of an economic center in the Roman world was a people worshiping strange gods, performing strange rituals, engaging in all sorts of pagan activities and, importantly, profiting from all this. It's not insignificant that a central part of the account in Acts was Paul confronting the young slave-girl who was fortunetelling to the significant profit of her masters. While we don't know for certain, it would not be surprising that this was just one of many situations of people profiting from their pagan activities in this and other cities. There are no uncertainties about how Paul felt about this. Paul rebuked the girl (actually the demon inside her), at which point the demon departed leaving the young girl unable to profit her masters. Of course, this infuriated these folks because their little cash cow of fortunetelling had been slaughtered, so to speak. The text doesn't tell us what Paul said to the masters, but it seems reasonable to assume that Paul called them out for the evil they were perpetrating and demanded its stoppage. This is not mere speculation, as we know the men went to the chief magistrates of the city looking to prosecute Paul and those he was traveling with saying, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans" (Acts 16:20-21 NAS). We know from the very next verse (Acts 16:22) that the men were successful in their argument against Paul, as they beat them and threw them in jail.

This is significant to our passage in Philippians in that one could safely assume that as Paul was teaching and preaching the gospel to those in Philippi, he was telling them that this Roman way of life--worshipping pagan gods and profiting from such practices--was completely at odds with the one, true God. Paul would have suggested in no uncertain terms that this had to stop. As we saw earlier, his message caused all sorts of uproar in the city. The new believers took Paul at his word and believed the gospel as Paul had presented it. In doing so, they would have radically changed the way they lived their lives, becoming outcasts in the city, not unlike Paul himself. Those individuals not responding to Paul's

message (which would have been the vast majority, to be sure) would have seen these new believers as enemies of sorts, at odds with the "Roman way", and as serious threats to their comfortable and prosperous lifestyles. In response, the non-believing Philippians rejected and dismissed the believing Philippians, going so far as to boycott, disrupt and even sabotage their businesses. These "Jesus Freaks" were trouble, and they wanted everyone to know it.

Not only did this ostracism have a significant financial impact on this community of gospel believers, it robbed them of the respect, honor and social status they had always enjoyed as Roman citizens. Now they were the regular target of abuse and the laughingstock of the community. The price they were paying was steep, and it had to hurt. Additionally, as is often the case when things begin to go bad, we see later in the letter (Phil 4:2-3) that within the believing community itself, there was tension, strife and disagreement. It would have been natural for the attention to shift to ones' own survival and away from caring for the needs of others. While it may not have been chaos...yet, there was trouble brewing, and Paul was writing squarely into the middle of it.

Again, this is a letter primarily of exhortation and encouragement, but it is such in an environment which was anything but exhorting and encouraging, at least for this handful of believers who were being told to "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5 NAS).

Before moving on to the passage at hand, there is one other assumption I would like to address that will have a certain amount of influence on how I am understanding Paul. As we know from this letter and from all the others Paul wrote, he was a remarkable Jew. By that I mean that nobody knew their Jewish history, Jewish culture and Jewish significance better than Paul. He, by his own admission, was a "Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee...as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil 3:5-6 NAS). While in some ways, this status was seen as negative, there is another way in which this worked to Paul's advantage. When he was ultimately confronted with the truth about Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 9:1-19), we are told that he went to Damascus and "for 3 days was without sight and neither ate nor drank" (Acts 9:9 NAS), and spent that time praying (Acts 9:11). Now the text doesn't say what it was that Paul was praying about for those 3 days, but it seems reasonable to assume that this time was spent meditating over all that he had been taught of God, His people and His coming Messiah; and how that fit with what Paul had learned from Jesus, himself, and the truth about who he was. In other words, Paul was putting together all the pieces of this vast Jewish history which was culminating in this one, Jesus.

Notice now what the text says Paul said and did the moment his blindness was lifted, and he regained his strength; "and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (Acts 9:20 NAS). What Paul concluded after putting the entire story together was that, indeed, what the

truth revealed through the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (which Paul knew so well) was fulfilled in this one man, Jesus, the long awaited "Son of God." Notice how later in the text when we read the account of one of Paul's first sermons (Acts 13:16-41), he simply took his listeners through the whole of Jewish history. In his retelling of the story of God's people, he emphasizes the connection between the promises of God, and how this Jesus was the fulfillment of those promises. Paul also recounts the absolute significance of Jesus' "link" to King David as the Messiah. Paul reminded his listeners that it was specifically from the offspring of King David that God would bring a savior (Messiah), this being Jesus. We will see the importance of this later.

My contention is what Paul taught the Gentiles was exactly what he preached to the Jews in the synagogues. The message didn't change depending on Paul's audience. It was a gospel ripe with Jewish significance and meaning, yet utterly significant for the Gentiles as well. In other words, Paul tells the Jewish story to Gentiles because the full meaning of his gospel wouldn't make sense to them unless they understood the Jewish context. The history of the covenants God made with the Jewish people, and the way in which those covenants would be fulfilled was critical to understanding Paul's message. And, at the very center of the story were the people who would play their parts in fulfilling these covenants and, importantly, the titles they would have.

For evidence of this assumption, one can read, among other places, Acts 18 & 19. There we find Paul on more than one occasion entering a city and first going to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and also with the Gentiles. Unless Paul had a different message for the Gentiles, which there is no indication at all that that was the case, he "reasoned" with each the same thing. And what would Paul "reason" with them? The clarity with which the Jewish Scriptures spoke of this coming Messiah, and the absolute certainty of Jesus being that one of whom the Scriptures spoke. Even when the Jews resisted, Paul continued to speak with the Gentiles. What did he speak with them about? The same truths he was communicating with the Jews only filled in with the entire Jewish context.

This is important because some of what Paul says to the Philippians (and certainly others in other letters) makes sense only if they understood the Jewish context in which Paul said them. Terms like "Christ", "Son of God" and "Father" are loaded with Jewish significance. To make sense of what Paul is saying, there had to be a great deal of background. It is with this shared understanding that Paul wrote his letters, the one to the Philippians is no different.

## **THE TEXT**

New American Standard (NAS)

**Philippians 2:5-11** 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,<sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

My Translation (RLR)

**Philippians 2:5-11** 5 Think this way concerning yourselves which also is how Christ Jesus thought. 6 Who, while existing as the expression of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be demanded by rights. 7 Rather, he set aside what would be "best" for himself taking on the expression of a bond servant. Having been made just like men and having been found in every external way a man, 8 he humbled himself having been obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross! 9 As a result, indeed, God exalted him to the highest point and granted him the name above all names 10 in order that in the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow--heavenly ones, earthly ones and those "under" the earth--11 and every tongue might confess that the Lord Jesus is Christ for the glory of God the Father.

## THE MEANING

The traditional view of this passage sees Paul referring to that time when the Son (the second person of the Trinity) was co-existing with the Father (the first person of the Trinity) in heaven. At that time, the Son enjoyed the status of being co-equal to the Father. But in the plans and purposes of the Godhead (the Father, Son and Spirit), it was meant for the Son to leave His place in heaven to humbly take on the body of a servant, Jesus of Nazareth. To do so, the Son must not hold on tightly to His equality with the Father in heaven, but rather must empty Himself in the form a bond-servant. The sacrifice the Son would make was to lower Himself from his heavenly existence to that of a mere mortal—one who was made just like other men and looked like other men. Not only would the Son lower Himself as a man, but in doing so, he would have to literally sacrifice Himself on behalf of the people He was made to be like. But once this mission was accomplished, the Father would reward the Son by re-establishing his once elevated status of King of kings and Lord of lords and seat Him back on the throne of God.

For most, this has been the only way to understand this passage and others like it. While I am not suggesting this perspective is impossible, I am suggesting

there is an alternative view that in light of the context in Philippians, makes much more sense.

I am going to take the passage verse by verse and breakdown what I think are the relevant details about the content, and then I will try to summarize what I think Paul is trying to communicate in the passage as a whole. I will provide each verse in the New American Standard Bible (NAS) first, then below I will offer my translation (RLR). I will follow that with my explanation of what I understand Paul to be communicating to his Philippian readers.

## **2:5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (NAS)**

### **2:5 Think this way concerning yourselves which also is how Christ Jesus thought. (RLR)**

The attitude to which Paul refers is found in the preceding two verses, " Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:3-4 NAS). The intent here, I think, is not particularly difficult. Paul is suggesting to the Philippians what we find throughout the New Testament--the life of a believer is not merely about meeting one's own needs, but also about meeting the needs of others. This is at least one of the things it means to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 23:39).

The question is, "Why does Paul say this right here to the Philippians?" It could be just a random bit of encouragement, but I just don't think that's how Paul writes. He says this because it is relevant to their circumstances, and he is responding to precisely the issue at hand. When the Philippian people heard Paul's gospel, not only did they believe what he said, but there was a radical change in their lifestyles—a change that would have been entirely at odds with the Roman way of life. Those who were not part of this new believing community were not going to idly sit by, especially if what these believers were embracing was going to have a negative impact on them, as we saw earlier in Acts. What followed this divide of beliefs and lifestyles was persecution and discomfort. The non-believers would have set out to make it very hard on the believers, as we have seen already in this city, and also later in other cities as Christianity made its way throughout the Gentile world. Early on, these new believers banded together in support of each other and encouraged one another to "keep the faith" in the face of persecution. But after a while, things had to get tough. What was once a rallying point—this shared belief in the gospel—became such an individual burden that one by one the question had to arise, "Is this really worth it?" The thought had to develop, "I am a Roman! I have enjoyed a very comfortable life. Not only have I enjoyed a comfortable life, I deserve a comfortable life. I have always been treated with respect, honor and privilege--all

that is gone. And for what? A hope I am beginning to question, and a commitment to a group of people that are causing me nothing but grief. I can do better—I already have done better. I am somebody—I should be treated as somebody. I want what’s mine, and to get it, I need to abandon those that are creating the trouble for me and take back what I’m owed—the life of a Roman!” Suffering the effects of being marginalized and ostracized, the importance of the “body”, and in particular the needs of others, would have been quickly forgotten.

This is exactly what Paul warned them of when he said, “do nothing out of selfishness or empty conceit.” The temptation to meet one’s individual needs, both material and societal, was overwhelming, especially as those things disappeared right before their very eyes. When the cause of this grief was the association with a certain group of people, and in particular, what they believed, “me” would become much more important than “them”. But there was something even more profound in Paul’s warning. It was God, the author of all reality, Who was ultimately the cause of their trouble. Following this God and what He said was true was depriving them of a lifestyle they had once enjoyed. By following Him, they had joined ranks with these others who, as a result of what they believed, were ostracized, marginalized and outcast. The choice they had to make was this: trust God Who, as Paul had declared, had their best interests in mind. In spite of the circumstances they found themselves in, there would come a day when they would be rewarded with the most valuable thing of all—Eternal Life. Or, they could take matters into their own hands and reject what had come between them and what they wanted. They could determine they knew what they needed better than God did. Ultimately the selfishness and empty conceit that Paul was warning them of was not only between them and their fellow believers, but more importantly, between them and God! It was to Jesus that Paul says they should look to get their answer.

**2:6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, (NAS)**

**2:6 who, while existing as the expression of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be demanded by rights. (RLR)**

The "who" in this sentence is referring to Jesus mentioned in the verse before.

The next word, "existed", is clear enough in its meaning, but there is a question about when this existence took place. The most natural way to take it is just simply that time in which Jesus existed on earth. Paul could have just as easily said, "who, when he was here on earth...", or "while being on earth". The other option is to make the assumption that Paul is speaking of that time when Jesus "existed" prior to his coming to earth. Paul, of course, doesn't say that, but it is possible that Paul would just assume that his readers know that he is talking about that time when Jesus was "existing" in the heavens with the Father. While

both meanings are possible, I am taking the more straightforward approach that Paul is speaking of the time that Jesus spent here on earth.

I have translated the Greek word, ὑπάρχων (hoo-par-cone), "existed", which is typically how one would translate an aorist verb, but the word is actually a participle. Technically, it would be more accurate to translate it something like, "existing", or "while existing", which would be fine and certainly would not change the meaning in any way. Either rendering makes sense.

This next phrase is where major decisions must be made that will frame the rest of the passage. As noted above, the NAS has rendered it, "in the form of God", and I have rendered it, "as the expression of God". In the Greek text, there are just 3 words: 1) the preposition, ἐν (en), 2) the noun, μορφῆ (more-phe), and 3) the noun, θεοῦ (the-ou).

The first word, ἐν, I have translated "as". It is not my purpose here to spend a great deal of time discussing the many, many ways in which prepositions are used, and in particular this preposition; but suffice it to say that the meanings and uses are wide ranging and varied. ἐν is most often translated "in", but there are many, many other translations of this word that are used in different contexts. I have chosen "as" only because I think it best reflects what Paul is trying to communicate. Liddell and Scott suggest that one of the meanings of "en" communicates, "II. of the state, condition, position, in which one is: 1. of outward circumstances," (reference?) This is precisely what I think Paul is suggesting here in his use of the word ἐν.

This next word, μορφῆ, is less straightforward. Besides the 2 times it is used here in Philippians, it is only used 9 other times in the Bible. Except for maybe 1 or 2 of those cases, it is used very differently than in Philippians. Below are all the other places it is used. I have put in bold the NAS translation of μορφῆ

<sup>NAS</sup> **Job 4:16** "It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance; **A form** was before my eyes; *There was* silence, then I heard a voice:

<sup>NAS</sup> **Isaiah 44:13** <sup>a</sup>*Another* shapes wood, he extends a measuring line; he outlines it with red chalk. He works it with planes, and outlines it with a compass, and makes it like the **form** of a man, like the beauty of <sup>b</sup>man, so that it may sit in a <sup>c</sup>house.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 3:19** Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with <sup>a</sup>wrath, and his facial **expression** was altered toward Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. He answered <sup>1</sup>by giving orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 4:36** "At that time my <sup>1a</sup>reason returned to me. And my majesty and <sup>b</sup>splendor were <sup>2</sup>restored to me for the **glory** of my kingdom, and my counselors

and my nobles began seeking me out; so I was reestablished in my <sup>3</sup>sovereignty, and surpassing <sup>c</sup>greatness was added to me.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 5:6** Then the king's <sup>1a</sup>face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his <sup>b</sup>hip joints went slack, and his <sup>c</sup>knees began knocking together.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 5:9** Then King Belshazzar was greatly <sup>a</sup>alarmed, his <sup>1b</sup>face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 5:10** The queen entered the banquet <sup>1</sup>hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, <sup>a</sup>"O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your <sup>2</sup>face be pale.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Daniel 7:28** <sup>1</sup>"At this point the revelation ended. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts were <sup>a</sup>greatly alarming me and my <sup>2</sup>face grew pale, but I <sup>b</sup>kept the matter <sup>3</sup>to myself."

<sup>NAS</sup> **Mark 16:12** And after that, <sup>a</sup>He appeared in a different **form** <sup>b</sup>to two of them, while they were walking along on their way to the country.

The uses in Daniel, while not exactly what we have in Philippians, are helpful. The NAS translates the word both "face" and "expression" (there is the one case, 4:36, where, as best as I can tell, they have translated it "glory". It is not clear to me why they have chosen this rendering. I don't think it's the glory of his kingdom that is being restored, but rather the king's former "role" or even "expression" as king that was restored). The way "face" is used here is not a physical face (there is another word, προσώπου [pros-oh-pou], for that), but rather like a "face" one would make if you sucked on a lemon. In each case, μορφή is used to indicate what is going on inside the king based on the outward expression he is showing. This is very familiar to us, and certainly not problematic. One might say that the μορφή was simply an external outline of the "reality" behind that outline.

The use in Job is similar to that in Daniel, but slightly different. Job speaks of a μορφή passing before him. We know from the previous verse that Job is speaking of a spirit, and the μορφή is simply the "form" that the spirit took so that Job might see what he otherwise could not. What was unseeable became seeable by taking on a μορφή.

Isaiah is a more familiar use to us, but actually the least helpful for our purposes. μορφή is spoken of as a wood carving that takes the μορφή of a man. The wood, of course, is not actually a man, but takes on the appearance of a man. One could say that in this use, the μορφή is a representation of something else. While this use is speaking of something inanimate that represents something that is animate (not at all what the word means in Philippians), its underlying meaning of

one thing as the expression of another does help us get a flavor for how the word might be used in Philippians.

The last use besides Philippians is in Mark. This is the scene after Jesus rises from the dead and is appearing to several of his disciples before his ascension. The text says that Jesus appeared to them in a different μορφή. In Luke 24:13-31, which appears to be the same account, but much more detailed, Luke notes that the disciples did not recognize him, as "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him". It seems that this prevention was simply Jesus taking on this different μορφή, which I would take to mean nothing more than Jesus took on a different appearance--it was still Jesus; he just took on a different "shape". Again, I do not think this is precisely how Paul uses μορφή in Philippians, but it does help inform our understanding.

Before we get to μορφή in Philippians, I want to address the final word in the phrase, θεοῦ, which is translated, "God". There is much that could be said about this word and the thousands of times it is used in the Bible, but for my purposes, I am just going to assert that when Paul uses the word "God" (which he does 23 times in Philippians), he is always speaking of God, the Father; the Creator of all reality; the transcendent God of the universe; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The word has different forms due to its particular place in a sentence, and, it sometimes has the definite article (the) it sometimes doesn't. Regardless of how it is used though, Paul always means the same thing--the God who spoke and it was. So whatever relationship Jesus has with God as a result of this μορφή, it is God, the Father with whom he has this relationship.

It is also important to note that the God to whom Paul (and all the other biblical authors) refers in this way is the very same God that John refers to in saying "No man has seen God at any time..." (John 1:18 NAS). This is actually a very controversial verse, but in spite of that controversy, it is extremely informative. The next phrase is "...the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*". This verse requires a paper of its own, but as it relates to how the biblical authors understand God, the Father, I have included it only to note that He is the "unseeable" God. Two further notes about this verse are worth mentioning: 1) What the NAS has translated, "only begotten", would be much better translated, "unique". The word is μονογενής in the Greek, and nearly all translators now agree that "unique" is a much, much more accurate rendering. 2) The second "God" (θεός) in the verse has a textual variant in which "son" [υἱός] [hwee-os] belongs instead. From my perspective, either word could be made sense of, but υἱός makes much more sense, and is how I would take the verse. The point here is that God, while He has introduced Himself to His creation in various ways (pillar of smoke, bright light, burning bush, etc.), is simply not visible. In order to be seen, He must manifest Himself that the unseeable becomes seeable. Very importantly, when He does this, what we see is not literally God, that is to say we do not see the Transcendent, but rather manifestations or pictures of the Transcendent.

This brings us back to μορφῆ, and how I understand Paul to be first using this term. Jesus existed as the "shape", "form", "expression", "manifestation", "representation" of God, but he was not literally the transcendent God, Himself. Rather, he was the expression of God Who remained transcendent. That said, Jesus was the ultimate way in which God made Himself known to His creation. One might say that the "transcendent" "untranscended" in the person of Jesus in a way that He never had done before. Again, while God "untranscended", as I have described it, I do not mean that God was no longer transcendent. God remained transcendent, and at one and the same time, "untranscended" in the person of Jesus. When one looked upon Jesus, one saw all that one could see of God in the "form" of a man. While Jesus was obviously not just a "facial expression", "outline" or "wood carving" of God, he was similar to those things in that he was "expressing", "outlining" and "representing" in human form what the transcendent God of the universe was like. Jesus was God "morphed" into human flesh and blood. This is exactly what I think Paul means when he says that Jesus existed as the μορφῆ of God--he just was God's "expression".

I think there is a helpful phrase taken from the Greek English Lexicon (Liddell & Scott):

σοὶ δ' ἐπὶ μὲν μορφῆ ἐπέων thou hast *power to give shape* to words, i.e. to give a colour of truth to lies.

They use μορφῆ here to describe how words, which are just that--words--until they "take shape" into the expression of what those words really mean. Although God is not "just God" in any sort of insignificant or meaningless way, it would be right to say that He does "take shape" or even "give context" in Jesus. How does He do that? By giving Himself as an expression in the person of Jesus.

There is one other quote that is helpful taken from Moulton and Milligan (reference?) in regards to the word μορφῆ:

Kennedy has shown from the LXX usage that "the meaning, far removed from the accurate, metaphysical content which belonged to it in the writers like Plato and Aristotle." Hence the meaning must not be over-pressed in the NT occurrences, though μορφῆ "always signifies a form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it".

The critical point here is that Jesus fully expresses God.

Just a note here about one of the axioms of the orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. My understanding is that the contention of this doctrine is that prior to Jesus' "arrival" here on earth, he existed alongside God, the Father, co-equally and co-eternally as God, the Son. Another way to say this is that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, existed from all time and all eternity in heaven with the first person of the Trinity, the Father. While it is not my purpose to argue against specific points

of this doctrine, the question does arise here, "If the Son has been the second person of the Trinity for all time and all eternity, why does Paul say that he existed in the 'form' of God? Wouldn't he just be God rather than the 'form' of God?" It seems that Paul would have been clear that if he wanted to assert that the Son was, in fact, the second person of the Trinity, he certainly would not have used language like he does here in Philippians that makes a very clear distinction between actually being God and being the μορφή of God. It seems that to solve this problem, one would have to concede that Paul is not talking about "all time and all eternity" here, but rather he is saying that when Jesus was here on earth, he existed as the μορφή of God, that is God, the second person of the Trinity and not, as I have argued, the μορφή of God, the Father. That does solve the earlier problem, and could be what Paul is saying, but that gives rise of other issues which we will see later.

Before moving on, I want to address a question that will come up in the next verse. Paul says in vs. 7 that Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant..." (NAS). The question will arise, "Can one, namely Jesus, have two μορφή(s) at once?" I will suggest that while Jesus existed as the μορφή of God, he, at one and the same time, took on the μορφή of a bond-servant, which is what Paul is arguing the Philippians should do as well. How can this be?

First, when Paul uses the term "bond-servant", it is important to know what he means. A bond-servant was one who had given himself entirely over to the will of another. He was also one who had laid aside his own interests for the interests of another. In the case of Jesus, he gave himself over entirely to the will of the Father. In doing so, Jesus set aside his own interests for the interests of others. This will we see later in very graphic terms when Jesus set aside what arguably was best for him, that being self-preservation, and instead took up the interests of others by going to the cross. It is interesting to note that unlike our perception of what it means to be a servant; one forced into the service of another, a bond-servant at the time of Jesus was a bond-servant by choice. He decided to give himself over to the will and bidding of the one who was his master. It was this decision on the part of Jesus that we will later see was central to Paul's exhortation to the Philippians.

Notice this description of a bond-servant is not a physical description, but rather a functional description. One wouldn't describe another physically and then instead functionally. One would describe another physically and also functionally. This is how I understand Paul to be suggesting that Jesus was two μορφή(s) at once. He was the μορφή of God, as I have already described it; the physical embodiment of the invisible God. He was also, not instead, the μορφή of a bond-servant; the savior of God's people as a sacrifice to the Father. Jesus did not stop being the μορφή of God in order to take on the μορφή of a bond-servant, but rather his mission as the μορφή of God was to take on the μορφή of a bond-servant. So yes, indeed, Jesus can and did have two μορφή(s) at once.

This notion of Jesus being the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  God takes further shape and becomes even more significant as we look deeper into the Jewish context. By doing so, we get a clearer picture of what Paul's readers were hearing as he was describing again exactly who this Jesus was and what had done. As we have seen from earlier work in this project (i.e. Ryan Carroll's work on The Davidic Covenant), in the ancient near east, and certainly in the background of Jewish thought, there was a clear understanding that in the Father/son relationship of the God to the kings, there was a very real sense in which the king was the visible representation of the invisible God. There is ample evidence throughout the Old Testament that as king of Israel, one truly was the manifestation of God to His people, albeit imperfect. The language of the Old Testament suggests that when the king spoke, it was just as though God had spoken; what authority God had, the king had; as one would respect and honor God, one should respect and honor the king. Although the Old Testament never uses the exact word,  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  (or the Hebrew equivalent) to describe this relationship, it certainly seems to use its meaning in defining the Father/son relationship. While not in exactly the same way that Jesus is the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  of God, I do not think it would be wrong to say that David, Solomon, Rehobaom and all the kings of Israel were the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  of God.

It is the next part of Philippians that I think gives credibility to this notion of the kings being the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  of God:

**...did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped (NAS)**

**...but did not consider equality with God something to be demanded by rights (RLR)**

It is this "equality" with God that I think is key to our understanding of what Paul is driving at in this  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  relationship. The word that is translated equality is  $\acute{\iota}\sigma\alpha$  (isa) in Greek, and it is simply an adverb which means "equal to", "same as", "like", "alike", etc.. The most striking use of this word, other than here in Philippians, is found in John 5:18:

**John 5:18** For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself **equal** with God (NAS).

A proper understanding of this verse, and certainly the way it describes Jesus being equal to God, is very helpful in understanding what Paul is communicating in Philippians. John is recounting the story of Jesus healing the paralytic on the Sabbath. While the man who was healed was thrilled, for he hadn't been able to walk his whole life, the Pharisees were furious because Jesus had broken the Sabbath (you weren't supposed to do miracles on the Sabbath!). When confronted by the Pharisees about what he was doing, Jesus answers, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working" (John 5:17 NAS). Notice what it is in the very next verse (vs. 18) that the Pharisees latch onto and seek to

kill Jesus for saying. It was the fact that Jesus was calling God his own Father that they were stunned by and, importantly, that by doing so, Jesus was making himself out to be equal with God. The question is, "In what way were they seeing him as equal, or for that matter, how did Jesus see himself as equal?"

As mentioned earlier, throughout the Old Testament, we have language time and time again that refers to the kings of Israel being "sons of God". As such, these sons, while not God Himself, were God's representatives of Himself to His people. The sons were "as God" on earth. God made it abundantly clear that by His design and, importantly, by His appointment, when the son spoke, it was as though the Father, God, was speaking. Why? Because the sons were "equal" to God in that as far as those who were looking and listening were concerned, it was God speaking. There are places in the Old Testament where the writers go so far as to call the appointed son (king) "god" (see Psalm 45:6-7 & 82:6). Again, it is critical to understand that while these sons (kings) were not somehow made of godlike stuff or even acted particularly godlike, they nonetheless, because God determined that they would be "Him on earth", were exactly that--God on earth. This is described over and over again in the Father/son relationship of the Bible.

Further, there was no more important role in Jewish history than to be a "son of God", and with that role came a great deal of expectation and responsibility, for ultimately, it would be the "son of God" who would deliver the Jews from their enemies, and usher them into the promised age of peace and prosperity that God had declared would be the eternal destiny of His chosen people. While God, the Father would be the ultimate author of such a deliverance, it would be His "son", His chosen human representative on earth, who would physically carry out this promise. Not only was there a great deal of expectation and responsibility of the "son", but with that role came honor, reverence, power and authority. God had declared that the "son" carried all the weight of Himself, the Father. The "son's" rule was to be the rule of God, and the declarations of the "son" were to be the declarations of God. Not only that, but the appointed "son" would rightly receive the honor, respect and even fear that one would have for God, Himself. Even if the "son" did not behave like the Father, he nonetheless was to be treated like God would be treated. Obviously, it was a HUGE deal to be the "son of God"!

Back to John. When Jesus says in 5:17 that "My Father is working until now..." he is making a statement that might get lost on us in a culture far removed from the one Jesus was speaking into. When he speaks of God as his Father, it is with all this Father/son history in the background. He is saying that he is one of those who have been appointed by God to "be God on earth". He was likening himself to David and Solomon and all the other "sons of God". Even more, while we don't know from this particular passage, Jesus wasn't just another "son of God", but he was the long awaited "Son" (I use the capital "S" to indicate that Jesus was the final son that would ultimately and finally fulfill the promises of God to the Jewish people. I do not use the capital "S" to indicate some

metaphysical difference between Jesus and the rest of the “sons of God”, but rather a functional, moral and divinely appointed difference between Jesus and all the other “sons of God”) that would finally bring to pass all that God had promised long ago. Jesus was a different “Son” insofar as he really would fulfill once and for all what none of the other “sons of God” could fulfill. After 400 years of waiting for the next, and final, “son of God” to arrive, Jesus declares (as does John the Baptist--John 1:34, and God, Himself--Mark 1:9, Luke 3:22 & Matthew 17:5) that he is that one. This is what he means when he says that God is his Father--he means that he is the “Son” in the way that the Jews would understand the “Son” to be--God’s final representative (and authority) on earth.

Notice again what angers the Pharisees. They are angry because Jesus is claiming God to be his Father. They are not angry, as we 2000 years later often misunderstand, because Jesus says he is God, at least not like we normally think that to mean. They are angry because they understand everything that is behind someone saying that God is their Father. This one would rightly say that he is "equal" with God in that this one truly was God's authority on earth. Of course, in the Pharisee's minds, Jesus possessed not one of the qualities that they assumed would be present in a "son of God", not to mention the fact that Jesus was certainly not acting like a "son of God". And if he was the "Son of God", what he said would have the authority of God, and they DID NOT like what he was saying, so they simply rejected that he was the "Son".

So what does all this have to do with Philippians? My contention is that there is this second way in which Jesus was the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  of God, and it is contained in the Father/son relationship of the Old Testament. He was the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  of God, very much like David and Solomon were the  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  of God. We don't have the specific language of  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  in the Old Testament describing the "son of God" as such, but we do have this reference in John that clearly links this idea of equality with God to the Father/son relationship, which is exactly the same language Paul uses in Philippians to describe how he understands this  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$  relationship of Jesus to God. I think this is the "equality" with God that Paul is referring to.

\*To be clear, all the previous “sons of God” were symbolically God on earth. While God had said that they possessed His rule and authority, and clearly acted on behalf of God in a unique and meaningful way; they were never said to be the actual, physical embodiment of God, Himself. This is where Jesus was decidedly different. Jesus was not merely a symbol of God in the way the other sons were symbols, but he was actually God on earth. He was God on earth not because he was made of Godlike stuff in some metaphysical way that the other sons were not, but he was God because he was the one and only human whom God decided would be the physical embodiment of the Himself on earth. While all the other sons were expressions of God in limited and imperfect ways, Jesus was the expression of God in a complete and full way. Only of Jesus is it said, “...he has explained Him (*God*) (John 1:18).

This last part of Philippians 2:6 says:

**...a thing to be grasped (NAS)**

**...something to be demanded by rights (RLR)**

The "thing" is the equality with God that Paul just identified. He says of this equality that Jesus did not consider, regard or think of it as "something to be demanded by rights" (my translation). This is not a particularly difficult concept, although it is the only time the word is used in the Bible. What it doesn't mean is that this equality with God is not something one can "understand, comprehend, or wrap one's mind around". This is why I don't particularly like the translation of "grasped". The word means something more like "hold on tightly", "reach out and grab or take", "steal" or "demand because it's yours". In this context, I think it's very clear what Paul is trying to communicate. He is saying that even though Jesus, as the "Son of God" (in the way that I described the Son of God earlier), had every right to expect, assume and even demand that he be honored, revered and even worshiped; he never did "exercise" that right and take what was rightfully his.

This is a point worth pondering for a minute. The previous "sons of God" (kings of Israel) were men who, by all accounts, at the time of their reign, were the most powerful men in the world (at least in the case of David and Solomon). They were looked upon with the utmost of honor, glory and majesty. One who held this incredibly important and meaningful office would no doubt enjoy the praise and even worship of those whom they were appointed over. In fact, we have places in the Old Testament where the people of Israel were told by God to "pay homage" to the son. For example:

**Psalm 2:12** Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish *in* the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him! (NAS)

Clearly the expectation on the part of the people of Israel and the son of God (king) appointed to rule over them was that reverence and honor would be paid to one who was said by God to be His "equal" on earth.

The relevant question for our passage is, "What would we expect from a 'son of God' when this reverence and honor is NOT paid to him? What would be a reasonable thing for a 'son' to do when he is not given the respect he is owed?" The very natural and right thing to do would be to "reach out and grab" what is rightfully his. In other words, he would demand that that which was given him by God, the role as his "son", be recognized and acted upon by the very people he was given to rule over--they MUST pay him honor and respect. And when they didn't, he would make them!

This is precisely what Jesus did not do. As the appointed "Son of God", Jesus had every right to demand that he be honored and worshiped. Yet, in what later is described as humility, he did not demand what he certainly could have, nor did he "cash in" on what he had every right to collect. Even though as "Son of God", the people of Israel should have bowed in his presence, Jesus never forced that on anyone, neither did he think of himself as one who deserved such treatment. Importantly, for our passage, we should note that Jesus did not demand from those who were persecuting him that they treat him with the respect, honor and dignity that he really did deserve. Neither did Jesus merely look out for his own personal interests with respect to those that would ultimately become part of the believing community, and those for whom Jesus would ultimately die. It would have been entirely natural and even expected for Jesus to assume his God-given position as the "Son of God" and declare his rule and authority, and just let those whom he was given to rule over simply fend for themselves. Of course, this is decidedly not what Jesus did, as we will see in the next couple of verses.

**2:7a but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, (NAS)**

**2:7a Rather, he set aside what would be "best" for himself taking on the expression of a bond servant. (RLR)**

Before going into the explanation of this verse, I want to note that I have taken verse 7 and split it up. I understand the first half to belong with verse 6 and the second half to belong with verse 8. That being the case, the phrase "he set aside what would be best for himself" belongs with the earlier phrase, "Who, while existing as the expression of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be demanded by rights." Together, then, it reads:

"Who, while existing as the expression of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be demanded by rights. Rather he sat aside what would be best for himself taking on the expression of a bond servant."

**...but emptied Himself... (NAS)**

**... Rather, he set aside what would be "best" for himself (RLR)**

The word that NAS has translated "emptied" and I have translated "set aside what would be best for himself" is the Greek word ἐκένωσεν (e-ken-oh-sen). Much has been made of this word in discussions of this passage. There are claims that its underlying meaning holds the key to the great mystery of what Paul is really driving at. It may be that understanding what Paul means in his usage of this word helps a great deal to inform the meaning of his thinking, but to suggest that it is the "key", I think, is a bit overstated.

The word is used only 4 other times in the New Testament (twice in the Old Testament: Jeremiah 14:2, 15:9), and I'm not sure any of these uses are particularly helpful in understanding what Paul means in Philippians. The other 4 uses are: (I have put in **bold** the translations of the word κενόω [**ken-ah-oh**])

**Romans 4:14** For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is **made void** and the promise is nullified; (NAS)

**1 Corinthians 1:17** For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be **made void**.(NAS)

**1 Corinthians 9:15** But I have used none of these things. And I am not writing these things that it may be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man **make** my boast an **empty** one.(NAS)

**2 Corinthians 9:3** But I have sent the brethren, that our boasting about you may not be **made empty** in this case, that, as I was saying, you may be prepared;(NAS)

In 3 of the 4 cases (Romans 4:14, 1 Cor. 1:7 and 2 Cor. 9:3 ), the word is passive, suggesting that whatever κενόω(ing) is, it is being done to something else. That is not the case in Philippians where the word is an aorist verb suggesting the action was taken, not taken upon. In all of the cases, what is being spoken of is not a person, as it is in Philippians, but rather a thing (faith, the cross of Christ, a boast). Also, in all 4 cases the word implies that what was once intended to be for one purpose was at risk of being something else, which does not seem to be what Paul has in mind in Philippians. These differences don't mean that they are not at all relevant, but it would be hard to make any direct correlation between them and the use in Philippians. Finally, in all these cases, this action of κενόω(ing) has a very negative connotation, while the use in Philippians, at least as I understand it, has a positive connotation. Paul is praising Jesus for his action, certainly not criticizing him.

I think it's helpful to note what Paul is contrasting κενόω to. In the last verse, He says that Jesus did not consider his equally with God something to be demanded by rights. What comes next is the contrast. Instead, he says, Jesus κενόω(ed) himself. If I'm right about what "not regarding equality with God as something to be demanded by rights" means, then the opposite of that would be to set aside what would otherwise be yours for the taking. It would be doing what would have looked to be not in the best interests of the one doing it. Instead of taking advantage of his God-given role as the Son of God, as everyone would expect him to do, he instead set aside those expectations. Jesus did what looked to be anything but what was in his best interests—he took on the expression of a bond-servant leading him down a path of humiliation, pain and death. It is this action

that I understand Paul to be describing when he says that Jesus κενόω(ed) himself.

Recalling an earlier section, it is critical to remember that Jesus did not stop being the "Son of God", or leave his given position of "equality with God" in order to take on the expression of a bond-servant. Jesus, in addition to being the expression of God as His unique Son, at one and the same time, chose to take on the expression of a bond-servant. This "emptying" of himself, as I understand it, is not some sort of metaphysical shift of Jesus from one state of being to another, which is most often how this is taken, but rather a purposeful shift of role and expectation in order to be utterly sensitive (and even obedient) to the needs of others. As the "Son of God", there is no doubt that Jesus would one day take his rightful place on the throne of God as the King of kings and Lord of lords, but as the prophet Isaiah said,

**Isaiah 53:1-12** Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. <sup>4</sup> Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living, For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke *was due*? <sup>9</sup> His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. <sup>10</sup> But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting *Him* to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see *His* offspring, He will prolong *His* days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. <sup>11</sup> As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see *it* and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors (NAS).

If ever there was an "emptying", this is it!

**...taking the form of a bond-servant... (NAS)**

**...taking on the expression of a bond-servant. (RLR)**

The way in which Jesus accomplished this notion of ἐκένωσεν was to take on the μορφή of a bond-servant. As mentioned earlier in thinking ahead to this phrase, while Jesus never stopped (and still hasn't) being the expression of God he concurrently took on the expression of a bond-servant. In other words, Jesus was two μορφή(s) at once. While Jesus was the very expression of God on earth, he purposefully and deliberately assumed the role of a bond-servant in obedience to God. Notice the language of the two ways in which Jesus was a μορφή. In the first instance, Jesus **existed** as the μορφή of God--this, I think, is referring to his divine appointment as the "Son of God", and that this particular "Son of God" was the actual embodiment of God on earth in righteousness and perfection unlike all the others previous "sons of God". In the second instance, Jesus **took on** or **assumed** the μορφή of a bond-servant. There is no indication that he vacated his position as the μορφή of God, but rather he "added" to his existence the role of a bond-servant.

While I'm not sure Paul would say that in exactly the same way as Jesus has two μορφή(s) at once, the Philippians possess two μορφή(s); he is suggesting that in exactly the same way that Jesus, in spite of possessing one privilege, sacrificed that privilege in his obedience to God; the Philippians should likewise sacrifice their privilege in obedience to God. Jesus, as a bond-servant of God, was obedient to the One he was in service to (God) by giving himself as an offering to God for those whom God had chosen. The Philippians were not being asked to give up their lives on behalf of others by dying on a cross, but they were being asked by God to give up a great deal as obedient servants to God by being faithful to Him and being faithful to the community that He had placed them in. In both cases, as bond-servants to God, a particular privilege was being required to be foregone, and in obedience to the Master, another role was to be taken as part of God's plans, purposes and reasons. It is in this way that both Jesus and the Philippians possessed two μορφή(s), and that the requirements of Jesus and the requirements of the Philippians are exactly the same such that Paul can say to them to "Have this attitude which was also in Christ Jesus", for he was suggesting that in a very meaningful way, they were in precisely the same place.

**2:7b-8 and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (NAS)**

**2:7b-8 Having been made just like men and having been found in every external way a man, 8 he humbled himself having been obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross! (RLR)**

There are at least two ways to understand what Paul is saying in this section, which leads to two distinct perspectives on how, exactly, Jesus assumed his role as a bond-servant. The first, which is not how I am taking it, sees the "emptying" of Jesus as his becoming human. As such, this understanding takes the "being made in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man" as the way in which Jesus assumed his role as a bond-servant. This is certainly possible, and this would make a lot of sense if one sees Paul's primary point of this whole section as describing how Jesus left his heavenly abode and emptied all that he was to become a man on earth rather than God in heaven. But this is not what I understand Paul to be saying. It seems to me that Paul is describing exactly how Jesus engaged himself as the bond-servant he was created to be.

Remember Paul is encouraging the Philippians to "have this attitude which was also in Christ Jesus." In other words, "Do like Jesus did". The last section was dedicated to recognizing just how remarkable is was that even as the "Son of God", Jesus was prepared to assume his given role as a servant. This section, I think, is dedicated to a comparison of Jesus, the man, to the very people Paul was writing to. His point is quite simple: "Jesus was in every way just like you! He was made of exactly the same stuff as you, and for all intents and purposes, he looked just like you. He was the 'Son of God', which gave him a role to play that was unlike any role any other man would ever play, but even as the appointed 'Son of God', he was no different in his humanness than you. And what did he do? Did he demand that those he came in contact with bow down and worship him as 'God on earth'? No! He utterly humbled himself in obedience to God--obedient all the way to death! This is what God expects of you too!"

There is often times much made of the two words translated "likeness" (ὁμοιώματι) (ha-moi-oh-mati) and "appearance" (σχήματι) (skay-mati), which interestingly are both very often linked with μορφή, but I am not at all convinced that the technical meanings of the words are what Paul is driving at. Of ὁμοιώματι, Moulton & Milligan says:

"a thing made like something else (concrete)..."

Of σχήματι, Moulton & Milligan says:

"The thought of 'external bearing' or 'fashion'..."

Without taking a great deal of time to dissect these words, it seems to me that all Paul is trying to communicate is the similarity of Jesus to his readers. Again, Jesus was made of the same stuff as them (σμοιωμα), and he looked just like them (σχημα)--there was no excuse for them not to do like he did in humbling himself in service to others.

It is at this point, I think, that Paul ends his comparison of Jesus to his readers (and consequently his admonition of them to do like Jesus did) and focuses in on the significance of exactly what it was that Jesus did by humbling himself to the point of death. Before expounding a little on that significance, it's worth mentioning that some argue that Paul is suggesting that the Philippians should be just as willing as Jesus was to sacrifice himself, even to the point of death. The point that is being argued is that there is no limit to what one should do when giving oneself over to the service of another. That may be true, but that's not what I understand Paul to be suggesting here.

Jesus was a bond-servant to God. He wasn't just any old bond-servant though--he was the bond-servant who was the "Son of God". He was the final Son of many sons who would come and finally complete the mission that the "Son of God" was made to do. The "Son of God" would come and redeem the people of God, not through some sort of military conquest or political overthrow, but the "Son of God" would come and exercise complete obedience to God, which would include the sacrifice of himself on behalf of those that God had sent him to be the redeemer of. This really was the ultimate mission of the "Son of God"; certainly a mission no other "son of God" had accomplished.

Jesus, as we know, did exactly that. He became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. This is incredibly significant, not just because Jesus died as a sacrifice for others, but he did so in obedience to God. God had declared through the prophets that His chosen One would come and, among other things, suffer a humiliating death at the hands of evil men for the sake of those God had called his own. As that One, Jesus would have to do just that--be obedient to the role that God had set out for him to play--a role that no one else ever had played or one that anyone would ever want to! Jesus had a choice to make. He had to decide if he would carry out what it was that God had set before him to do. This is beyond the purposes of this particular work, but I am completely convinced this was a REAL choice Jesus was making. It was entirely possible, even in the mind of Jesus, that he would not be obedient in that such obedience would be an excruciating, humiliating and horrific experience. As we know from the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was aware of what lay before him, and he was serious when he asked God if there might be another way. We cannot know whether Jesus was actually contemplating being disobedient to God, but we can know that Jesus was counting the costs of obedience, and there was serious consideration given to whether it was worth it or not.

But Jesus was obedient--obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. This next point I think we miss.

**2:9 Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, (NAS)**

**2:9 As a result, indeed, God exalted him to the highest point and granted him the name above all names (RLR)**

Notice the first word, "Therefore" or "As a result". It was precisely because Jesus was obedient that God "highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name." Had Jesus not been obedient, which I believe was theoretically possible; God would NOT have exalted him. This is an important point but admittedly presents a conundrum. In the plans, purposes and sovereignty of God; Jesus was going to fulfill his God-given role as the "Son of God" no matter what. There was nothing that Jesus could have done, or anyone else for that matter, which would have gotten in the way of God completing what He had set out to do—the plans and purposes of God are unthwartable. So in this respect, there was no way in which Jesus could have been anything but obedient. But of course, this is true not only of Jesus, but of all of God's creation. There is nothing anyone or anything can do to get in the way of what God has intended to do. God has written the story of reality, and that story will not change; certainly not based on the decisions and actions of its characters. But as those acting out the story God has written, each and every choice is real, meaningful and determinative—every choice has a consequence, and those consequences are lasting and even eternal. I think we, as individuals, understand this truth, and as believers, we make every attempt to live our lives in light of this; but rarely, if ever, do we think of Jesus living under and in the same reality. But this, I think, is exactly Paul's point.

Jesus was the "Son of God". As we saw earlier, before Jesus even embarked on his public ministry, God said at his baptism, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Ultimately, there was nothing that was going to change that. But it is also true that there were a series of events and circumstances that Jesus, even as the "Son of God", would have to encounter, endure and complete. To do so, Jesus would have to be obedient to the Father at each and every turn to demonstrate he was, indeed, the "Son" God said him to be. What I am suggesting is that at those decision points (for example, the temptations in the desert), Jesus was faced with real choices that from his perspective, were not necessarily a given. He weighed and measured each choice he was faced with as to whether he would be obedient to the Father or not. In each and every case, Jesus' choice was to be obedient, and as a result, he demonstrated that he was, in fact, the true "Son of God".

This is where we come back to Paul's language in Philippians. "As a result" of Jesus' obedience, God highly exalted him. It was required that Jesus be obedient in order that God would highly exalt him, which I would take to be Jesus' reward. Had Jesus not been obedient, He would not have received his reward. As a human, even as the "Son of God", Jesus was faced with real choices that he had to act upon which were determinative of exactly how God would respond. This was utterly relevant to the Philippian believers, and why I believe the true humanity of Jesus to be so important. Paul is suggesting that in

exactly the same way that Jesus was faced with choices (although infinitely more difficult than any the Philippians would ever have to make) in regards to obedience to God, the Philippians were faced with those same choices. Jesus, in light of his role as “Son”, was tempted to retreat from what God would have him do to fulfill that role, and the Philippians were likewise tempted to retreat from what God would have them do to “recapture” their privileged status, and the life that would come as a result. But Jesus, in his humanity, chose to be obedient to God and consequently was given his reward. The Philippians, if they remained obedient to God, would also reap their reward of the promises God had made. If they were not obedient, in exactly the same way that if Jesus were not obedient, the reward would not be given. In the end, the point is quite simple: Choices matter! Jesus’ choices mattered and God highly exalted him. Likewise, the Philippians’ choices mattered and God would ultimately reward them for the choices they would make.

**2:10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, 2:11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (NAS)**

**2:10 in order that in the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow--heavenly ones, earthly ones and those "under" the earth--11 and every tongue might confess that the Lord Jesus is Christ for the glory of God the Father. (RLR)**

These last two verses are language borrowed directly out of the Old Testament.

**Isaiah 45:21-23** "Declare and set forth *your case*; Indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me.<sup>22</sup> "Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other. <sup>23</sup> "I have sworn by Myself, The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness And will not turn back, That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance* (NAS).

Before discussing this passage, it's worth remembering that Paul is speaking to a Gentile audience, yet he is quoting from the Hebrew bible. This is why I argued earlier that part of Paul's strategy in bringing the gospel to a Gentile world was to educate them in the importance of the Jewish story. Without the background knowledge of all that God had said and promised and partially fulfilled in the Jewish people, one could never make sense out of what He was ultimately up to. I am convinced that the first thing Paul did when he arrived at a new community was to "school" his audience in Jewish thought. (This begs a question for me: I wonder if we should be doing the same thing?) Paul quoting from Isaiah certainly suggests that his readers had knowledge of the importance of these words, or the quote would have had little or no impact.

This passage in Isaiah is meant to be Yahweh speaking. Yahweh was to be the savior of Israel, and no other god was to be sought or considered. The one who turned to Yahweh was the one who would be saved. The promise of Yahweh was that He would, in fact, be the savior of His people, and that in the end, "every knee will bow and every tongue will swear." Obviously, this was spoken not to the people of Paul's time, but to the people of the southern kingdom of Israel to whom Isaiah was prophesying. At that time, Isaiah was declaring specifically that Israel (Judah) must turn to Yahweh, for He was the one and only God who could rescue them.

In Philippians, Paul quotes this passage and directly links it to Jesus. If one is not careful, one might conclude that Paul is suggesting that Jesus is one and the same as Yahweh. In other words, when all is said and done, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Yahweh. But that's not what Paul says. He first says that "In the name of Jesus...". The word "name" is the Greek word ὄνομα. Thayer's Greek Lexicon is helpful here:

ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ, in devout recognition of the title conferred on him by God (i. e. the title ὁ κύριος)

I think this is exactly right and fits perfectly into what I understand Paul to be saying. It is in "devout recognition of the title conferred on him by God" that these knees will bow and tongues will confess. And what is that title? "Son of God", which carries with it the title, rank and authority of God.

Also in Thayer's:

By a usage chiefly Hebraistic the name is used for everything which the name covers, everything the thought or feeling of which is roused in the mind by mentioning, hearing, remembering, the name, i. e. for *one's rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellences, deeds*

It is in the title, rank and authority that Yahweh has given Jesus that every knee will bow and every tongue confess. It is important to remember here that as the "Son of God", Jesus carries all the weight and authority of Yahweh, Himself. Jesus is not the transcendent Yahweh, Himself; he is distinct from Yahweh as His expression in human flesh and blood, and as such, is as Yahweh, Himself. This is why Paul can say that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess exactly as Isaiah said of Yahweh--Jesus is precisely who Yahweh sent to be His full expression on earth, so to bow to Jesus is exactly the same as to bow to Yahweh, but he need not actually be Yahweh.

Secondly, notice how Paul ends the passage, "...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (NAS), or "confess that the Lord Jesus is Christ for the glory of God the Father" (RLR). I have rendered the Greek

“confess that the lord (master, owner and ruler) Jesus is Christ” because I understand that is who Paul has been arguing Jesus to be all along. He is the one God has appointed to be that long awaited Son to come and not only rescue the people of God from their own demise, but rule over them in complete righteousness and perfection. This is what one day, finally, everyone will see. Notice Paul doesn't say that everyone will confess that Jesus is Yahweh, but rather he says that everyone will confess that Jesus is the Christ. Again, Paul says there will come a day when everyone will know that Jesus is, in fact, the very one that Yahweh has sent to rule over his entire universe as Yahweh Himself would rule. Jesus is that one, that man, whom God has appointed to righteously reign over the eternal kingdom that Yahweh has promised to the people of His choosing, and when that day arrives, there will not be one who does not recognize exactly what has unfolded before them.

Finally, and not unimportantly, Paul deliberately finishes by saying all this is to the glory of God the Father. Each and every bit of the story that has, is and will unfold is to the glory of God the Father. Not to the glory of you, me, the angels or even Jesus. The glory is solely reserved for the One who spoke and it came into being.

## **THE CONCLUSION**

Ultimately, I think the conclusion to draw from this passage is quite simple: The people of Philippi were getting stepped on. The result of their belief had changed their lives. What they were now committed to was completely at odds with the “Roman way”, and this was causing them a great deal of suffering and anguish due to the persecution of those around them. The simple solution was to renounce what they had come to believe, and more importantly, deny the obedience to God they had come to embrace. By doing so, they could go back to a lifestyle of respect, honor and dignity. To do this, they would have to personally reject what they had come to believe about who this Jesus was that they had come to put their trust in. Not only that, but they would also have to abandon their commitment to those in their community who had come to a similar faith and who, as part of that community, had come to rely on each other for their very existence. In the end, to reject what they had come to believe was to be disobedient to God and to deny the role and mission God had given them to play as part of His unfolding story of salvation, redemption and reward.

Paul is imploring them not to do this. He is begging them to remember what they believe, why they believe it and the glory set before them if they can and will endure. He is reminding them that one's own, perceived immediate needs are secondary to what God has set out as one's ultimate need--to be accepted by Him. Paul is reassuring them that to be honored and accepted by men, while temporarily meaningful and gratifying, will ultimately fade. In the end, such praise will become utterly unimportant on that great and final day. Paul says that

to reach out and "take", as it were, the honor and respect one might feel they are owed is short-lived at best. One MUST keep in mind that God has given each a role to play in the greater community of believers. That role, and the reward that follows, far exceeds anything one might receive from other men!

Paul uses Jesus as an example to the Philippians. Jesus, as the "Son of God", had every right and reason to "take what was his" and demand that he be respected, honored and held in the highest of esteem. Anyone who knew the role that the "son of God" had played throughout Jewish history knew that the "son" would be paid the greatest respect and honor. Of all the men on earth, that one was the one whom God had appointed to be His representative--His expression on earth. When one looked upon the "son", one looked upon God because that's who God said he was. Though many "sons" had come and gone as symbolic expressions, Jesus had come as the one "unique" "Son" who was the true and final expression of God. In a way that no other man had been before, Jesus was finally the embodiment of exactly who God was. Jesus was the only one who could ever say that he truly and fully was equal with God. Yet, with all that Jesus could have and should have expected, he did not consider this equality with God something that he would demand that others recognize. In other words, he did not "establish" his position in society like he could have, even when it appeared that that would be in his best interests. Instead, because he was utterly convinced and committed to the role that God had given him, he was obedient in his further role or expression as a bond-servant--indentured to God as a humble servant to His people. Jesus valued his obedience to God more than he did the praise of men in spite of what his obedience would mean—pain and suffering. Jesus had every "right" to demand what was his for the taking, but instead he chose to set aside what, by all appearances, would be the better choice—he chose to be obedient to God.

In exactly the same way, the Philippian people were to be obedient to God in the role and mission God had given them in spite of the affliction they would receive because of it. In the same way that Jesus "held back" what was his for the taking, the Philippians were to hold back. They were to set aside their need for an elevated place in society, and instead serve those who shared their faith in the one, true God. To be obedient to God was to take priority over the praise, adoration and acceptance of men, even at a great cost. The Philippians were to value more the reward from God than the praise from men.

Paul makes the important point that in spite of Jesus being unique in his role as "Son", Jesus was human exactly as the Philippians were human. He made choices like they made choices. He would endure or enjoy the consequence of those choices as they would endure or enjoy the consequences of their choices. Based on those choices, God would determine their reward as He did for Jesus. Paul concludes that the choices the Philippians were faced with were no different than the choices Jesus was faced with.

My view of this passage differs from the traditional view in many respects, but there is one primary difference that bears mentioning. The traditional view argues that the “emptying” Jesus did was that of “emptying” his heavenly self (the second person of the Trinity) that he might come and humbly take up residence in a human body. This makes little sense to me. Paul is using Jesus as a comparison for the Philippians. He is essentially saying to them, “Do like Jesus did”. If what Paul is describing is Jesus leaving heaven and coming to earth, how could the Philippians do anything of the sort? They could be humble, but in the traditional view, the humility Jesus exercised and what the Philippians might do were completely different. It seems unlikely this is what Paul is trying to say. The view I have offered allows the Philippians to compare their choices with those of Jesus, and in a meaningful way, see themselves in similar circumstances to that of Jesus. Like Jesus, they must choose to be obedient in spite of the costs.

We have a similar choice to make today. We live in a society that scoffs at absolutes, mocks the belief in the One, true God and scorns those who seek to live their lives in the light of that truth. A commitment to the gospel comes with a price. Believers are often labeled as dangerous, hateful and absurd. Along the way, those committed to truth will be faced with a choice to make: stay true to those beliefs and suffer the consequences, or conform to the “norms” of society and live comfortably in the mainstream. There are those who have come before us whose truth-seeking cost them a great deal; some their lives. There is some comfort in that. But there is something powerful, exceedingly powerful, in knowing that there came a man who in every meaningful way was just like me. What he was asked to give up was far beyond anything I could ever imagine. This man was said by God to be Lord of lords and King of kings. He was the very reason for which God created the world in which I now live. He had a status that would make anything I might enjoy pale by comparison. And this one, by virtue of who God said he was, had every right in the world to reach out and take what was his. But he didn't! With his reward in mind, He sacrificed everything in obedience to God and for the sake of his brothers. Can not I...should not I do the same?

**Philippians 2:5-11** 5 Think this way concerning yourselves which also is how Christ Jesus thought. (As Christ Jesus considered himself, you also consider yourselves. This thinking you should have in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.) 6 Who, while existing as the expression of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be demanded by rights. 7 Rather, he set aside what would be "best" for himself taking on the expression of a bond servant. Having been made just like men and having been found in every external way a man, 8 he humbled himself having been obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross! 9 As a result, indeed, God exalted him to the highest point and granted him the name above all names 10 in order that in the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow--heavenly ones, earthly ones and those "under" the earth--

11 and every tongue might confess that the Lord Jesus is Christ for the glory of God the Father (RLR).