

PAPER #8

Philippians & the Pre-Existence of Jesus

Once again, we examine whether there is evidence of an eternal, pre-existent Son who is distinct from God the Father. In this paper, I shall examine whether there is any evidence in Philippians that would settle this issue. Philippians 2:1–11 is another passage that is commonly understood to support the notion of a pre-existent Son who is distinct from God, the Father. In its immediate context this passage reads:

Phil. 2:1 ¶ Εἴ τις οὖν παράκλησις ἐν Χριστῷ, εἴ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης, εἴ τις κοινωνία πνεύματος, εἴ τις σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοί,

Phil. 2:2 πληρώσατέ μου τὴν χαρὰν ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε, τὴν αὐτὴν ἀγάπην ἔχοντες, σύμψυχοι, τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες,

Phil. 2:3 μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν ἀλλὰ τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ ἀλλήλους ἡγούμενοι ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν,

Phil. 2:4 μὴ τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστος σκοποῦντες ἀλλὰ [καὶ] τὰ ἐτέρων ἕκαστοι.

Phil. 2:5 ¶ Τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

Phil. 2:6 ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ,

Phil. 2:7 ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

Phil. 2:8 ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.

Phil. 2:9 διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα,

Phil. 2:10 ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πᾶν γόνυ κάμψῃ ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων

Phil. 2:11 καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσῃται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.

The NASV translates this:

Phil. 2:1 ¶ Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,

Phil. 2:2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Phil. 2:3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

Phil. 2:4 do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Phil. 2:5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

Phil. 2:6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

Phil. 2:7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men.

Phil. 2:8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Phil. 2:9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,

Phil. 2:10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

Phil. 2:11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Argument for a Pre-existent "Son"

The argument from the evidence of these verses in support of the eternal, pre-existence of the Son goes something like this:

In this passage, Paul appeals to Jesus as an example of the kind of humility that we, as his followers, should manifest. Accordingly, Paul describes the incarnation as an act of profound humility. As he puts it, Jesus pre-existed in the "form of God." However, rather than insist upon enjoying the status and power that divine pre-existence afforded him, he was willing to "empty himself" of the privileges of his divine pre-existence and become a mere human being—a state of significantly lower and humbler status.

Paul's whole argument hinges on two important facts: (1) Jesus existed prior to his incarnation in "the form of God." (2) The incarnation—becoming a human being— was an act of profound humility on the part of this pre-existent Jesus who existed in the form of God. These facts explicitly state that Jesus existed prior to his birth in Bethlehem; and, that his pre-existence was in the "form" of God himself. To exist "in the form of God" is to be none other than "of the divine essence." Hence, Jesus was a distinct divine person long before the incarnation. This is in complete harmony with the Trinitarian doctrine that Jesus existed as a separate and distinct person of an eternal godhead before the creation of the world.

Response to this Argument for a Pre-existent "Son"

As an initial response to the above argument, let me outline the important assumptions that underlie this argument:

- (1) This argument assumes that when Jesus pre-existed in the "form of God," he did so as a divine person who was distinct from God, the Father.
- (2) This argument assumes that Paul understands Jesus' incarnation to be an act of humiliation.
- (3) This argument assumes that it is the *fact* of the incarnation that is the model of Jesus' humility to which Paul is appealing.
- (4) This argument assumes that, in some significant sense, Jesus' becoming a human being involved him ceasing to exist in the "form of God."
- (5) This argument assumes that the *fact* of Jesus' incarnation *can* act as a model for his followers' behavior.

I will examine each of these assumptions in turn:

Assumption #1 > When Jesus pre-existed in the "form of God," he did so as a divine person who was distinct from God, the Father.

Under this assumption, any argument that employs Philippians to prove Trinitarian Orthodoxy *vis à vis* Transcendent Monotheism, is reduced to question-begging. That is, the argument simply assumes what it is intended to prove—namely, that in his pre-existent state, Jesus was a distinct person from God, the Father.

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As I will show, there are significant problems with the typical Trinitarian reading of this passage. However, for the sake of argument, let us assume that the more typical reading of this passage is substantially correct. Still, nothing in this passage requires that Jesus, pre-existing in the "form of God, existed in distinction from the transcendent Creator, as some sort of distinct member of a Trinity.

Even if this passage teaches explicitly that Jesus, before he became a man, existed eternally in the "form of God," where does the passage teach that he existed as a distinct and separate member of a co-equal, co-eternal triune godhead. Indeed, wouldn't it be significantly more straightforward to assume that, in his divine pre-existence, he just was the transcendent Creator himself? He was the one and only self-existent divine being there is; and, then, at a certain point in history, that one and only self-existent divine being incarnated himself as a human being.

The point here is this: even if everything else about the typical interpretation is right (and I don't think it is), it does not prove Orthodox Trinitarianism. A Transcendent Monotheist could just as easily read the argument of Philippians 2:1–11 as this typical reading does. Philippians 2:1–11 is not determinative between Orthodox Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism.

The objection could be raised that, in this passage, Paul describes Jesus' pre-existent state as being in the "form" of God. It does not state that he is the self-existent, transcendent God himself; rather, it says that he is in the "form" of the self-existent, transcendent God. This concept requires that he be separate and distinct from God himself. Hence, it proves that he is a second person of the divine being; not simply the divine being himself.

I will discuss the meaning of *morphe* ("form") below. However, quite apart from what *morphe* means, the assertion that he is in the "form" of God in the context of this particular argument does not have to entail any distinction from God himself. The point Paul is trying to establish is this: Jesus, in his pre-existence, enjoyed a particular state and position of status—namely, he existed in the *morphe* of God himself. It would not matter to Paul's argument how he worded it. In the context of Paul's argument, it would mean exactly the same thing, whether he phrased it, "although He existed in the form of God," (as he did), or whether he had phrased it "although He existed as the transcendent God himself." Nothing in Paul's argument—as the typical reading understands it—requires him to affirm that Jesus existed in the "form" (*morphe*) of God rather than as the transcendent God himself. Hence, nothing in the argument necessarily implies a distinction between the pre-existent Jesus and the transcendent Creator of the universe. Accordingly, nothing in the argument can serve as conclusive proof of Orthodox Trinitarianism.

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Indeed, if one wants to press the point that “existing in the form (*morphe*) of God” entails that Jesus had to exist as a distinct being, then it just as naturally supports Arianism (the belief that Jesus was a “divine-like” being that God created before he created anything else) as it does Orthodox Trinitarianism. If Jesus only existed in the “form” (*morphe*) of God—it could be argued—he wasn’t God himself. He was simply God-like in “form”—only the semblance of God in his outward appearance. Such an argument is just as likely, if not more so, from the assumption that the “form” of God has to entail an explicit distinction from God himself.

What does *morphe* mean? The word is used only three times in the New Testament. It is used twice in this passage. The third time is in Mark 16:12 where Mark states that the resurrected Jesus appeared to two men in a different “form” (*morphe*). Presumably, these are the two men who were journeying to Emmaus. And presumably, it means that the *morphe* he had when he appeared to these two men was one that they did not recognize as Jesus. Hence, it was a “different” *morphe* than that of Jesus before his resurrection. Accordingly, *morphe* seems to mean something like “outward appearance” in this usage. It is used to denote Jesus’ physiognomy.

In the Septuagint, it is mostly used to describe the appearance of something. In Isaiah 44:13, however, it is used to mean an “image” or “likeness.” Describing the making of idols, he writes, “...and makes it like the form [*morphe*] of a man, like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house.”

In my judgment, this is how Paul is using *morphe* in this passage in Philippians. His claim is that the human being Jesus—not Jesus in some pre-existent state—existed in the “image” or “likeness” of God. I will not argue the point here. It should become clear from the arguments below that this is most likely what Paul means to affirm here in Philippians. If that is right, then Paul’s claim that Jesus existed in the *morphe* of God is exactly parallel to his claim in Colossians 1:15 that Jesus (the human being) is the “image of the invisible God.”

Assumption #2 > *Paul understands Jesus’ incarnation to be an act of humiliation.*

The typical interpretation takes it for granted that God becoming man in Jesus was an act of humiliation and condescension. It is often claimed that we see how much God loved us by the fact that Jesus (God) willingly underwent a degradation in order to become a man and live among us in order that he might save us.

To my knowledge, this is the only passage that could possibly be used to support such a claim. (Perhaps also 2 Corinthians 8:9, but I would understand this verse in exactly the same way I understand this Philippians passage.) Nowhere else do the apostles speak of the incarnation as a humiliation of God, or as a condescension. On the contrary, they speak of the incarnation as the joyful and wondrous glorification of a particular human

being. It is not a matter of God condescending; it is a matter of the man Jesus being exalted. It is not a matter of God being degraded; it is a matter of a man being deified.

The typical reading has its home in the context of ancient Platonic or Neo-Platonic thought—which is to say, in the context of the early centuries of Christian theology. It does not have its natural home in the worldview of Jesus and the apostles. They are not Platonists (as the “Church Fathers” were). From the standpoint of the Platonic worldview—where the divine, spiritual, invisible realm is inherently superior to the earthly, physical, visible realm—incarnation is inherently a matter of degradation. For the higher order being of the second person of the Trinity to descend into the lower reaches of existence by becoming a physical, material being is obviously an act of self-humiliation.

None of this is true within the biblical worldview. The Bible does not view the physical and material as being innately inferior to the spiritual. The created and contingent is inferior to the uncreated and self-existent, certainly. That is a different distinction. Granted, all material things are created, and therefore inferior to the self-existent God. But the inferiority of the material in Platonism is different from the inferiority of the material in the biblical worldview. For Platonism, the material is evil and degrading. In the biblical worldview, the material is less real than God; but it is not evil. Neither is it degrading. Hence, if God translates himself into human form, he is not lowering and degrading himself. He is simply representing himself in a realm that is less real and less divine than he is. In the process, he creates a being within that realm that is elevated by virtue of his unique relationship to God. If a man just IS God; then that man is all the more exalted for it.

Accordingly, if Paul does not view the incarnation of Jesus as an act of self-humiliation, then how can Paul cite the *fact* of the incarnation as an example of Jesus’ humility? This is a problem for the typical reading of this passage. The typical reading dogmatically assumes that it is the fact of the incarnation that is Paul’s model for humility. This is an unfounded assumption.

Assumption #3 > *It is the fact of the incarnation that Paul holds up as an example of Jesus’ humility.*

As we saw above, this is an unfounded assumption. It has plausibility through familiarity—through the influence of Platonism on Christianity and through the presumption of Trinitarian theology—but it is not likely what Paul intends. There is another way to understand Paul’s argument that is significantly more likely to capture what he meant:

In this passage, Paul appeals to Jesus as an example of the kind of humility that we, as his followers, should manifest. Accordingly, in 2:5 Paul exhorts his readers to adopt

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the same thinking (or mindset) [*phroneo*] that Jesus evidenced while he was living among us. Paul then goes on to describe the "mindset" that Jesus evidenced in his life among us [Phil 2:6–8]: Jesus, the human being from Galilee, existed in the very image [*morphe*] of God himself. That is to say, this man Jesus was the very incarnation of God. Nevertheless, he did not insist on enjoying the status and privilege that rightly belongs to being the incarnation of God. Instead, in a demonstration of profound humility, he was willing to "empty himself" of the privileges of his status as the Son of God, and play the part of a humble bond-servant. The man Jesus who lived among us did not lord it over us (even though, as the Son of God, he would have been fully within his rights to do so). He did not expect us to bow and scrape before him (although, as one who bore the very image of God himself, that would have been a reasonable expectation). He did not ask us to wait on him, serve him, and acknowledge him (even though, since he was God incarnate, that would have been an appropriate thing to expect). Instead, he humbly served us; even to the point of dying on the cross for us. This, Paul suggests to his readers, should be the kind of humility that they show in relation to one another. Just as Jesus (who was the very incarnation of God) did not insist on receiving the respect that was due him, likewise they should not demand the respect that they think they are due. Just as Jesus, out of a wonderfully humble love, devoted himself to serving us and looking out for our interests (rather than looking out for his own interests and demanding that we serve him), likewise they should devote themselves to serving others and not looking out for their own interests.

In this way of understanding Paul's argument, Paul is not holding up the fact of the incarnation as the example of the humility to be emulated. Rather, he points to the attitude and mindset of Jesus during his life among us. What is remarkable to Paul is not that Jesus had been God, but that he ceased to be God in order to become man. What is remarkable to Paul is that Jesus, as he walks the earth among us, just IS God, but that he never insists on enjoying the perks that pertain to being God. That is the amazing and remarkable manifestation of his humility. That is the sort of humility that all his followers should emulate.

Assumption #4 > Jesus' becoming a human being involved him ceasing to exist in the "form of God" in some significant sense.

I think this is a mistake. It misunderstands the essential nature of Paul's argument. Jesus' humility was not his becoming less equal to God. Rather, his humility was revealed precisely by the fact that he WAS equal to God, but did not insist on enjoying the privilege that involved.

It is ironic that Trinitarians take this passage the way they do. It entails understanding Jesus to have "emptied" himself with respect to his deity in some significant way. It is this voluntary "emptying" himself of deity that they understand to be the essence of his act of love and humility. Once, Jesus was fully God, enjoying all the privileges of being

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God. In becoming incarnate, he emptied himself of his pure nature and full privilege as God. The irony is that Trinitarians believe themselves to be protecting the uncompromised, unadulterated deity of Jesus by their doctrines. Yet they read Philippians in a way that requires Jesus to be, in some significant sense, a diminution of deity.

Under the alternative reading that I have proposed, no such diminution of deity is entailed by Paul’s assertion. The point Paul is making is not about some pre-incarnate Jesus “emptying” himself in order to degrade himself and become man. Rather, Paul’s point is about the incarnate Jesus, the God-man, “giving up” his entitlements in order to lovingly serve mankind as a humble bond-servant. It does not imply that he ever actually became anything less than he was—namely, fully God incarnate. It only implies that he never insisted on the acknowledgement and privilege that was his due. When understood in this way, the fact that Jesus has NOT ceased to exist in the form of God heightens and accentuates Paul’s point. Namely, Jesus was fully and completely God; but he behaved like a humble servant. That is the epitome of humility!

Assumption #5 > The fact of Jesus’ incarnation can act as an effective and meaningful example to his followers, instructing them in how to behave.

One of the indications that the alternative interpretation is more likely than the typical reading is the fact that it sets forth a superior example of humility. The fact of the incarnation proposes a less straightforward example of humility than does the real life attitude of Jesus. Paul’s readers do not have the option of becoming something other than they are. They could never condescend to actually be a lesser being than they are. So when, according to the typical reading, Paul proposes that they imitate the second person of the Trinity who, as a transcendent being, was willing to lower himself and become a part of the created order, he is asking his readers to do something that they could never do.

Of course, the typical reading is not assuming they could. It is simply recommending that they do something analogous—to behave as beings who are lower than they actually are; that is, to act with humility. According to the alternative reading, Paul is proposing that they imitate the actual mindset and attitude of Jesus himself. Even though he was the incarnation of God himself, he never copped an attitude. He was content to assume the role of a servant in relation to everyone he met. Instead of seeking to *get* from others the respect that was his due; he was always focused on *giving* to others the respect that was (more than) *their* due. That is an attitude Paul can reasonably expect his readers to emulate. It is not something that they can do only by analogy to what Jesus did. They can literally do the same thing Jesus did: put others’ interests ahead of their own.

Understood in this way, the alternative interpretation is an even more straightforward and compelling example of humility than the more typical interpretation. In the first place, the typical interpretation must assume that incarnation is an act of humility. As we

have seen, that is not clearly so. In the second place, if the self-humiliation of God makes any sense at all, it is something that only God himself could do. Accordingly, since man is not capable of such self-humiliation—of lowering himself to become something inferior to what he is—then how can man expect to emulate the example of God’s self-humiliation. Under the typical understanding, the exhortation is robbed of some of its force, because the example of self-humiliation is a divine, supernatural, unrepeatable feat. Whereas, under the interpretation I propose, there is nothing supernatural nor beyond man’s reach in the example of what Jesus did: he simply put others’ interests above his own.

Translation of Text in accord with the Alternative Reading

Here is how I would translate our passage:

Phil. 2:5 What indeed was there in the Christ Jesus, set your mind on this same thing among yourselves.

Phil. 2:6 He existed in the image [*morphe*] of God himself, yet he did not regard his equality with God a thing to be held onto tightly.

Phil. 2:7 Rather, he made himself of no account and took on the role [*morphe*] of a bond-servant, insofar as he was in the likeness of men.

Phil. 2:8 And being found, with respect to his nature, as a man—he subjected himself to disgrace, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Comments on This Alternative Translation

Comment on Phil. 2:5 > The subject of the sentence “what” or “that which.” It is the yet to be defined quality that Jesus exhibited that Paul wants his readers to emulate.

The verb is the imperative of *phroneo*. The verb means something like to “set one’s mind on” or to “have in mind” or “to be mindful of.” Paul is exhorting his readers to be mindful of that which was in Christ Jesus. As Paul proceeds, it becomes clear that, in Jesus, was a remarkable humility, a remarkable willingness to put others ahead of himself. See Phil 2:3 > “with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”

The “*en* you” is Paul’s indication that he wants the Philippians to be mindful of Jesus’ willingness to put others ahead of himself in their interactions with one another. Hence, “*en* you” should be translated something like “among yourselves.”

Comment on Phil. 2:6–7 > By claiming that Jesus “existed in the image [*morphe*] of God himself” Paul is once again repeating his fundamentally consistent Christology: Jesus is the translation of the unique person of God into the terms of a human person. It is in that sense that he is the “image” or *morphe* of God.

When Paul makes the claims that Jesus did not regard “equality” or “sameness” with God to be something to be held onto tightly, Paul is not speaking in terms of ontology. Paul’s interest and concern is status, prestige, privilege, honor, etc. Jesus did not so hunger after respect, honor, and privilege that he insisted on others showing him the honor that was due to him. The same honor that is due God was due to Jesus, since he was God in human flesh, but he was willing to forego it. Instead—taking on the role or persona [*morphe*] of a bond-servant—he took it upon himself to serve others, making sure others received from him the respect that was due them.

The participial phrase “insofar as he was in the likeness of men” means insofar as he was a human being among human beings. He was in the “likeness” of men in the sense that he was one of them. (Not in the sense that he only outwardly appeared to be one of them.) Paul’s point is that when God took on human form, translating himself into one particular human being among other human beings, he became a bond-servant. This is what is so remarkable to Paul. God did not translate himself into a human being among other human beings who took on the role of a powerful King who lorded it over other human beings. God translated himself into a human being among other human beings who made himself the servant of all.

Most English translations render it “he emptied himself.” This, I think, is influenced by a Trinitarian understanding of this passage. Paul proceeds immediately to tell us what Jesus did when he “emptied” (*kenoo*) himself—namely, he took the form of a bond-servant. Clearly, then, Paul’s point is that Jesus did not take any account of his equality with God with respect to how he behaved in relation to other men. He “made himself [his divine identity] of no account” (*kenoo*) insofar as his relations to others was concerned.

Paul creates a play on words here: In the reality of who he was, Jesus existed in the *morphe* of God. But he made his being in the *morphe* of God of no account to himself (in the way he interacted with others); and, instead, took on the *morphe* of a bond-servant. Paul is using *morphe* in somewhat different senses in these two uses of it.

Comment on Phil. 2:8> The dative of *schema* describes that with respect to which Jesus was found as a man. *Schema* here denotes the characteristic properties, the defining features, or the determinative character of something. Paul’s point very simply is this: Jesus was found, by any and all who knew him, to share the characteristic, defining features of a human being. Accordingly, he was mortal.

In that state of mortality in which we find Jesus—even though he is the very *morphe* of God—Jesus subjected himself to the eternal purposes of God and subjected himself to death. Not just death, but death on the cross at the hands of the Romans. Accordingly, he subjected himself to dishonor and disgrace. Translating this as “humbled himself” misses Paul’s point. Rather, he dishonored or disgraced himself [*tapeinoo*]. That is, by submitting to the ordeal of being executed as a criminal on the cross Jesus did far more than take on the *morphe* of a bond-servant. Even though he existed in the *morphe* of God, he did not consider himself “too good” to have to be dishonored and disgraced [*tapeinoo*] at the hands of the Romans. Instead, he submitted to that reality out of obedience to his Father.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine whether Philippians 2:1–11 provides any evidence of an eternal, pre-existent Son who is distinct from God the Father. Hopefully it has become clear that it does so only if such a view is “read into” the passage. What Paul most likely intended to argue in this passage involves these and only these underlying assumptions:

(1) ***Jesus is God incarnate.*** (Jesus existed in **the *morphe* of God.**)

(2) As God incarnate, Jesus was fully entitled to all the honor, respect, and privilege that belongs to the transcendent creator himself.

(3) As a human being in the world among other human beings, Jesus conducted himself in such a way that he never expected nor demanded from others the honor, respect, and privilege to which he was entitled. Quite to the contrary, he took upon himself the role of always serving others; he gave priority to others’ interests and needs ahead of his own.

As the list above shows, nothing in Paul’s argument requires, nor even suggests, that there be an eternal, pre-existent Son who is distinct from God the Father.