

## 2. LOST IN TRANSLATION: (The 'Philippians Hymn')

[www.thebiblejesus.com](http://www.thebiblejesus.com)

**Let** this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God (Philippians 2: 5-6 KJV).

Every sincere reader of the Bible wants to understand its originally intended message. We *really* want to hear the voice of God! We desperately need to hear “**thus saith the LORD**”! Although we concluded in our previous article that most Bible versions may be read with overall confidence, we did demonstrate the maxim that in some crucial areas **translation has become the subtlest form of commentary**.

Whether intentional or not, sometimes a translator may alter or obscure the message God wants us to receive. Come to think of it, all the Devil had to do to ruin mankind was add one little word to God’s original communication to Adam & Eve: “**You shall NOT surely die**”! Blessings and cursings, life and death were, and are, at stake!

### THE PHILIPPIANS HYMN.

Many NT scholars consider the ‘**Philippians Hymn**’ to be the earliest statement of the personal pre-human pre-existence of Christ. No wonder then, that **Philippians 2:5-11** is one of the top three “go to” passages for those wishing to defend the Deity of Christ.

In this article I want to highlight how nearly every modern translation of these key verses insinuates unwarranted “suggestions” into the text which have a significant bearing on the reader’s perception of the person of Christ. Whether intentional or not, the end result is a shoring up of the ubiquitous belief that Jesus was Himself God from all eternity past who voluntarily “laid aside” His Divine privileges to personally stoop down onto the stage of human history. But first ...

### CONTEXT

The particular danger facing the Philippians which Paul was deeply troubled about was disunity within their church. The first three verses of chapter two lay out the sources of this in-fighting: There was selfish ambition — always a danger within congregations when people advance their own agendas instead of the Gospel of Christ. There was the desire for personal prominence and promotion. And there was the subtle temptation for folks to become so engrossed in their own interests and troubles that they were neglecting the needs of others.

The cure for these causes of disunity within the Body of Christ is nothing less than the self-emptying example of Christ himself. If only every believer would adopt the **mind of Christ Jesus** and live by his example of self-abnegation, then unity must inevitably ensue. But just who is this **Christ Jesus** whose selfless example we are to mimic?

## TWO POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

The trinitarian argues that the example we are to mind is of a Christ who literally preexisted his appearance on earth as man. He talks of a Jesus who, before being ‘incarnated’, eternally existed **in very nature as God** (NIV), but who chose to voluntarily empty Himself of *some* of his Divine privileges in order to redeem men.

Standing on the opposite shore are those who see the text saying that Christ Jesus is **not** to be celebrated as a preexistent heavenly Deity, but in good OT fashion as the human Messiah-King who had been destined in God’s purposes to undo all the tragic consequences of the original Adam’s rebellion. His high calling notwithstanding, Messiah Jesus had to **learn obedience by the things which he suffered**. This entailed a whole life of self-denial — taking up his own cross every day — through which his Father God was **perfecting** him (Heb. 2:10; 5:8).

In other words, is the **Philippians Hymn** a prime example of a pre-existent God who “took on flesh” or, of a real human being destined to redeem — and finally to rule the world — but who had to deny himself in order to fulfil God’s eternal purposes for mankind??

How have we come to such diametrically opposing interpretations? Ah, you guessed it. It comes down to a matter of how to translate a few key words and phrases.

## PREEXISTENCE

To solve our inquiry we must examine the matter of Christ’s putative pre-human existence. If the apostle Paul had wanted to say that Christ Jesus had “pre-existed” as God before becoming man, then he had at his disposal a perfectly appropriate word ... **προϋπάρχω/prouparchō**.

It’s used, for example, in **Luke 23: 12** where we read; **That very day Pilate and Herod became friends with each other, for before that they had been at enmity between themselves**. It’s the word used in **Acts 8: 9**; **But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practised sorcery in the city ... But ...**

It’s **not** the word used in **Philippians 2: 5**! The apostle uses a verb which is a present active participle: **ὑπάρχων/hyparchōn**. This is often translated as “**having**” e.g. in **Acts 4: 37** where “**having** land, he sold it ...” or, as “**existing**” as in **Acts 19: 40** ... “**there is no reason existing for this charge**” or, as “**being unsuitable for harbouring**” in **Acts 27:12**.

You get the idea. Christ is **not** said to have “**pre-existed in the form of God**” before he was born. The statement is about him **being** or **existing in the form of God** whilst he lived *on earth*. The alleged pre-existence of Christ is **read into Philippians 2:6**. Some translations such as the **NASB** daringly read, “**who, as He already existed in the form of God ...**” (capitalisation and italics original)!

## CHRIST JESUS

Agreeing with this is another obvious point often overlooked; the **Philippians Hymn** is about **Christ Jesus**. Notice the word order. It's **Christ** (i.e. Messiah, a descriptive title) before the personal name, **Jesus**. <sup>(1)</sup> So, the **Philippians Hymn** is about Messiah Jesus. The emphasis is on the title, role, and status of Jesus. And it goes without saying that the title "Messiah" concerns the long-awaited saviour/king who was to be the **LORD'S** anointed human **lord** destined to rule the world as the **LORD God's** plenipotentiary.

In the OT there were many "christs" who exercised the roles of kings and priests. They were called "**the LORD'S messiah** ( Hebrew for **anointed**)" or, "**the LORD'S christ** (LXX)" — which is to say, **the LORD'S christian!** <sup>(2)</sup>

Thus, the sense is that Jesus is Yahweh's anointed priest-king. He is the human being whom God has appointed to establish the kingdom of God on earth. This is the one whose selfless example we are called to imitate. Although he was destined to rule over Israel and the governments of the world, this man refused to pre-empt God's timing, refused to snatch the crown, even though it meant a shameful and painful path of self-abnegation! It is **Christ Jesus** not **God Jesus** whom the **Philippians Hymn** extols!

## THE DYE WAS CAST EARLY

The **KJV** translated **Philippians 2: 5** by saying we are to have the **same mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God ...** This translation entered mainstream Christianity from 1611 so has had centuries to embed itself in Church tradition and belief.

The translators of the **New King James Version** first published in 1982 say the same thing; namely, that **Christ Jesus, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God ...** (NKJV).

This translation suggests that, by claiming equality with God, Jesus was not committing a robbery, not stealing something that did not already from eternity intrinsically belong to him: It was only natural for him to claim that he was **equal with God** because he *was*!

Assuming that Christ personally pre-existed as God before his appearance on earth, we can see why these translators 'suggest' that Christ **did not consider it robbery to claim to be equal with God**. It's impossible to rob yourself of what you already are and own!

Stands to reason that if Jesus knew he was "God of very God" (as per the later Church pronouncements) then, claiming to be God was not a crime. He was simply claiming what was already his by eternal right. So, is this an accurate translation of what the apostle Paul wrote? Let's see ....

---

<sup>1</sup> "Christ Jesus" occurs 95 times in the NT. "Jesus Christ" 135 times.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Lev. 4: 3,5,16; 6: 22; I Sam. 24: 6, 10; 2 Sam. 19:2; 23: 1, etc..

## WHERE DOES THE “NOT” OCCUR IN THE SENTENCE THE APOSTLE WROTE?

The careful reader will observe how the various translations give two possibilities. And it all depends on where they place the negative particle “not”. Is the negative particle “not” (οὐχ) attached to the verb “consider” — did **not consider** it robbery to be equal with God, **A)** or, **B)** is the negative particle “not” attached to the noun “robbery” — equality with God **not a seizure** to be considered?

**A).** Christ Jesus ... did **not consider** it robbery to be equal with God (KJV, NKJV).

Most modern versions attach the “not” to the verb **consider / regard / think / deem / reckon** (as e.g. KJV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, NIV, NASB, ESV, etc.).

As already indicated, in this translation the meaning is that because Christ has always been God, then he did not need to hesitate to claim that which was already his by virtue of his pre-existing Deity. Such a consideration on his part was not a robbery, not a seizure, not a daring heist for, as noted, you can’t rob yourself of what is already yours!

BUT there is another possibility for translation ...

**B).** ... and to arrive at it we must drill deeper into the placement of the “not”.

By placing the “not” where it occurs in the Greek — in front of the noun “seizure” — we are told Jesus **never aspired to be equal with God in the first place ... Who, being in the form of God, considered not a seizure / robbery ... ( <sup>3</sup> )** Something — a “robbery” — was **not** on his radar!

After I had written this I decided to check what *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Revised Edition)* has to say ...

**The Greek negative *ou* negates the word it precedes, as it does in every instance in Philippians, and a correct translation should place it before “robbery”, not before the verb ...” ( <sup>4</sup> )**

Wow! This pro-trinitarian commentary says the **correct translation should place the “not” before “robbery/seizure”, and not before the verb!** Pity most of our Bible versions get such an obvious translation issue so wrong! I wonder, does it have anything to do with the power of a theological paradigm manipulating translation?!

## EQUALITY WITH GOD OR LIKE GOD?

Furthermore, The phrase ‘being like God’ (Greek *ἴσα θεου*), too, may not simply be translated with terms like ‘equality to God’, ‘being like God’, as often happens. That would require the form *ἴσος θεος*. What we have in the text is the adverb *ἴσα*, and that

<sup>3</sup> ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ

<sup>4</sup> Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (General Editors) Zondervan, Ephesians - Philemon, Vol. 12, 2006, p 219.

merely means ‘as God’, ‘like God’. So there is no statement about Christ *being* equal to God, and this in turn tells against an interpretation in terms of pre-existence. ( <sup>5</sup> )

The lifelong ambition of **Christ Jesus** was to surrender to his Father’s will for he knew he was God’s human Messiah. He said, “**I must be about my Father’s business**” and, “**My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to finish His work**” (Lk 2: 49; John 4: 34).

He never insisted on his own prerogatives as the Messiah-King of Israel. He never demanded people serve him. He always behaved as the servant-king. He never considered claiming his God-ordained privileges for his own self-aggrandisement or pleasure. He emptied himself, and took on the role of a servant, all the way to the cross. He did all this *on earth*, not before coming here!

Bottom line: this verse says that the man **Messiah Jesus** never aspired to be equal with God in the first place:-

Unlike the pride of the Devil who aspired to seize the throne of God Himself;

Unlike Adam who listened to the lie thinking he too could be **as God**;

Unlike other dictators who have craved for the adoration of divine honours from their subjects (think, for example, of **King Newbuchadnezzar’s** image) and,

Unlike the only man in the NT who will yet **sit in the temple claiming to be God** (the **Man of Sin**) our Messiah Jesus refused to use his God-given authority and status as the LORD’S Messiah-King for self-aggrandisement and advancement!

Isn’t this astounding? **A fundamental translation error means that those who use **Philippians 2: 6** to assert that Christ Jesus saw nothing wrong with claiming to be God is the exact opposite of what the apostle wrote!**

**Eric H. H. Chang** bluntly asks, **How is it that Satan’s mind has been allowed to subtly creep into this verse and be attributed to Christ?** ( <sup>6</sup> )

In the beginning God told Adam that if he disobeyed God’s word then he would “**surely die**”. The Devil added one little word **NOT ...** “**You shall not surely die!**” And here in the **Philippians Hymn** our translators have re-positioned the same word “**not**” from the noun over to the verb, thus completely corrupting the translation. I have come to think that Satan hates the word ‘**not**’ ... much like our kids, hey!!

**One of the strongest assertions of the submissive mind of **Christ Jesus** to his God has become ‘Exhibit A’ for the spirit of Satan who tempted Adam to seize at a status forbidden to him — but which temptation Messiah Jesus utterly rejected!?**

---

<sup>5</sup> **Karl-Joseph Kuschel**, *BORN BEFORE ALL TIME? The Dispute over Christ’s Origin*, Crossroad, NY, 1992, p 251

<sup>6</sup> *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism*, Xlibris, 2009, p 230

## WHAT DOES “FORM” MEAN?

But you may still be asking, ‘But **being in the form of God** surely means that in his essential nature Jesus is God? Don’t many of the scholars say that to be **in the form of God** really does mean Jesus was God in his very nature?’ True. They do. Here’s what the popular **Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** says;

**FORM** (μορφή/*morphē*) denotes the special or characteristic form or feature of a person or thing; it is used with particular significance in the NT, only of Christ, in Phil. 2: 6,7 in the phrases “being in the form of God,” and “taking the form of a servant.” μορφή is therefore properly the nature or essence, not in the abstract, but as actually subsisting in the individual, and retained as long as the individual itself exists ... Thus, in [Phil. 2: 6-7] **μορφή θεοῦ** is the Divine nature actually and inseparably subsisting in the Person of Christ ... (1) it includes the whole nature and essence of Deity, and is inseparable from them, since they could have no actual existence without it; and (2) that it does not include in itself anything ‘accidental’ or separable, such as particular modes of manifestation ... ( <sup>7</sup> ) (Underlining mine)

Let’s not ignore or squib on this seemingly convincing argument. It’s used by many preachers and commentaries, and it’s borne out by popular translations to boot; e.g.

Who, **being in very nature God**, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped ... (NIV)

Who, **though he was God**, did not think of equality with God as something to cling to ... (New Living Translation).

These versions are so sure of this incarnational theory that they render the literal Greek phrase “**being in the form of God**” as “**being in very nature God**” — and unabashedly, that Christ “**was God**”! ( <sup>8</sup> )

The **New International Version (NIV)** footnotes state: **in very nature God**. Affirming that Jesus is fully God... **nature** ... essential form, the sum of those qualities that make God specifically God. **equality with God**. The status and privileges that inevitably flow from being in very nature God. Exactly as per **Vine’s** word study!

Thus the Greek word “**form**” (μορφή/*morphē*) has now morphed (yes you spotted the pun!) into “**very nature**” or, even the more daring, “**was God**”!

Whew. You can see why the average church-goer believes the Bible says Jesus literally pre-existed as God in heaven before he temporarily set aside his Divine prerogatives to become a human being: It’s because “Jesus is God” in his essential inner nature!

---

<sup>7</sup> **Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, MacDonald Publishing Co., McLean, Virginia, 22101

<sup>8</sup> This expression “**the form of God**” is unique in the entire corpus of Scripture and so must be treated with utmost care.



## REMEMBER OUR ADVICE?

Do you remember in our previous article how I pointed out that whenever we need to define the meaning of a word that we must consult Hebrew and Greek Lexicons? Appealing to concordances and commentaries is fine, provided we recognize their limitations. So, appealing to scholars such as the panel of translators for the NIV, or Vine *et al* for their *interpretations* of “form” needs further examination.

How do the lexicons define “form”? Without burying you (and boring you to tears) by piling up quote after quote of how lexicons define “form” I will give just one representative entry from William D. Mounce’s *The Analytical Lexicon To The Greek New Testament*;

**μορφή ... (noun) ... form, outward appearance (Mark 16: 12; Phil.2:6,7).**

**μορφόω ... (verb) ... to give shape to, mold, fashion, (Gal. 4: 19)**

**μόρφωσις ... (Noun) ... a shaping, moulding; in N.T. external form, appearance, 2 Tim. 3: 5, a settled form, prescribed system, (Rom. 2:20). ( 9 )**

According to the lexical definition, “form” has to do with the outward appearance, the external shape. Observe there is NOT a single word here about “very nature” or “inner essence” or “the sum of qualities ... that inevitably flow from being in very nature God”! Frankly, these are invented definitions, pure and simple. But if you are still not convinced let’s let the Bible itself define how it uses “form”.

## THE BIBLE IS ITS OWN BEST INTERPRETER

Take the verse penned by the same apostle Paul in **2 Timothy 3: 5: Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.**

Paul is speaking about the treacherous end times when mankind will be **lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, although they have denied its power;** avoid such men as these.

If we accept that “form” means the inner, essential, unchanging nature of something, then we have the illogical situation here where those who are behaving in open sinful behaviour really have beautiful inner godly natures after all!

---

<sup>9</sup> Bullinger’s Critical Lexicon, Kittel’s Theological Dictionary, Robert Thayer’s Lexicon, Walter Bauer’s Lexicon (translated and revised by Arndt & Gingrich) *et al* all define **form** as the external appearance or shape.

Are we to believe we are instructed to **turn away from** such reprobates, even though on the inside their essential natures are full of **godliness**!? God forbid! They displayed for all to see anything but the essential nature of God.

*The Expositor's Greek New Testament* states the blatantly obvious about these professing Christians whose outward conduct belies their inner state:- **The μὀρφοσις, embodiment, is external ...** Paul is speaking about those who had a purely theoretical, academic apprehension of practical Christianity. This verse defines for us that "**form**" is the external shape or appearance, **not** an essential, inner nature!

The same applies to **Mark 16: 12** where, after his resurrection, Jesus is said to have **appeared in a different form ...** Clearly this does not mean that Jesus changed his inner nature! It was his outer appearance that had changed. So, as per all lexical definitions, "**form**" speaks of outward appearance. ( <sup>10</sup> )

Dr. Jason BeDuhn produced a groundbreaking work in 2003 titled *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Versions of the New Testament*. He demonstrates that the Greek word "**form**" does not mean "**nature**" or "**essence**" and that therefore the **NIV** translators ;

**do not translate the Greek, but substitute interpretations of their own that are not based in Paul's language at all.** Therefore, they are **inaccurate**; and **their bias** is evident in what they try to **import into the passage**. [They] have tried to introduce a "two-nature" Christology (first worked out by Christians at the Council of Chalcedon over three hundred years after the New Testament was written) ... We do not gain much confidence in their interpretation of the passage when we see how **they tamper with the text** to support it. (page 53) (Bold emphasis and underlining mine).

### **SO — IS IT A) OR, IS IT B)?**

Earlier we asked whether the **Philippians Hymn** teaches **A).** the pre-existence of a Christ who is God, or **B).** the genuine humanity of a Christ as he lived his life on earth? I will close with quotes which sum up our discussion. You, the reader, can determine which is the accurate interpretation of the Biblical data, okay?

**A).** Professor M. Dods typically sums up the trinitarian narrative of **Philippians 2:6-11**; Christ is represented as leaving a glory he originally enjoyed and returning to it when his work on earth was done and as a result of that work. The glory which Christ left was the divine glory. ( <sup>11</sup> ) (Underlining mine)

---

<sup>10</sup> In my book *They Never Told Me THIS in Church!* I list many Biblical examples also from the OT, as well as from extra-Biblical Jewish writings, where in every case μορφή is used of outward physical shape and appearance.

<sup>11</sup> *The Gospel of St. John, The Expositor's Greek NT*, p841.



(By now you should be able to spot where **Dod's** commentary imposes a number of concepts not in the text. For instance, his keywords “**leaving**” and “**returning**” in relation to “**a glory he originally enjoyed**” appear nowhere in the text.)

As another pithily observes, **there is practically nothing in Dod's summary of the Philippian text that actually derives from the text itself! Trinitarianism is simply and unabashedly read into it. ( <sup>12</sup> )**

**B).** **Karl-Joseph Kuschel** has been described as “perhaps Germany's most brilliant younger Catholic theologian”. In his monumental *BORN BEFORE ALL TIME? The Dispute over Christ's Origin* (Crossroad, 1992 p 250) **Kuschel** crystallises our findings when he says that;

The Philippians hymn does not speak of the preexistence of Christ at all. Indeed, an increasing number of present-day New Testament scholars with good reason question the premises of exegesis hitherto and cannot see preexistence, let alone Incarnation, in the Philippians hymn.

In fact, **Philippians 2: 5ff** tells us quite specifically that because of his obedience and humbling of himself to the death of the cross, that **therefore God highly exalted him and bestowed on (gave to) him the name that is above every name (v. 9).**

There is no suggestion in the **Philippians Hymn** that Jesus returned to the glory he originally enjoyed as God. His super-exaltation is his Father's *reward* for his loyal obedience *on earth*. What he never claimed or seized for himself God has given to him in the end.

And Jesus' example of self-denial is our way to enjoying the promised future glory in God's kingdom too — and in the meantime of enjoying harmony with our fellow Christians!

## THE CONCLUSION

Once again we have demonstrated how **translation can be the subtlest form of commentary**. Sadly, millions are being misled on the question of the reputed preexistence of a Christ in heaven. In actual fact, the **Philippians Hymn** reveals a Christ who demonstrated what it is to live as a true obedient and believing man on earth!

---

<sup>12</sup> Eric H. H. Chang, *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism*, Xlibris, 2009 pp 26-27.