

# IS PHILIPPIANS 2:5-9 ABOUT A PRE-EXISTENT BEING?

*Ray Faircloth*

"Inevitably, those who begin their exegesis of this hymn with the assumption that it concerns a pre-existent divine being tend towards a docetic interpretation of these lines." *Jerome Murphy O'Connor. Renowned Catholic Biblical Scholar.*

*PHILIPPIANS 2:5-9 is best read from a word for word Greek interlinear translation. Because of a docetic and often trinitarian pre-existence bias, our current translations do not accurately express the thoughts of these verses. Of course, some translations are better than others and all render many parts of these texts accurately.*

*The Kingdom Interlinear word for word of the NWT reads :*

"This be you minding in you which also in **Christ** Jesus, who in **form of God existing** not snatching he considered the to be equal (things) to God, but himself he emptied form of slave **having taken**, in likeness of men having become; and to fashion having been found as man he made lowly himself having become obedient to death."

*The literal English form becomes:*

"Let this mental attitude be in you which is also in **Christ** Jesus, who existing in the **form of God** gave no consideration to a snatching [*grasping*], that he should be equal to God, but he emptied himself **having taken** a **slave's form**, having become in the likeness of men. Having been found in fashion as man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death."

*Young's Literal Translation reads :*

"For let this mind be in you that is also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God....but did empty himself, the form of a servant **having taken**, in the likeness of men **having been made**, and in fashion having been found as a man "

**THE SUBJECT OF PHILIPPIANS 2:5-9 IS THE HUMAN MESSIAH**

Verse 5 says "Let this mental attitude be in you which is also in **Christ (Messiah) Jesus...**" So the subject of these verses is not a pre-existent archangel or heavenly being but **the historical human Messiah Jesus** who came into existence at his birth (Luke 1:35, 2:11). It is as renowned biblical scholar Jerome Murphy O'Connor notes that "Since the hymn deals with Christ in **his concrete**

**terrestrial condition**, one should begin with the working hypothesis that the author views Christ as **man**,...The anthropology of Wisdom provides an appropriate background on the assumption that the author of the hymn was thinking of Christ as man." *Also Associate Professor of NT Rodney Decker states regarding Philippians 2 that "The context shows that it was only as man that Christ emptied himself"* Further to this James Mackey directs us to "the fact that the subject of the hymn is specifically named as **Messiah** Jesus, **a man** like ourselves..."

*Phil 2:5-9 is now generally recognized by bible scholars as a poem that was probably drawn from Isaiah 53 'the suffering servant who 'poured out his soul to the death' vs 12. It is not a theological treatise.*

*The context is: "but in humility of mind...let this mind be in you that is also in Christ Jesus." (vss 3-5). So the subject is **not about a change of Jesus' essence** or nature neither does it concern a pre-birth time for Jesus.*

#### ADAM CHRISTOLOGY IN CONTRAST TO

#### THE Gnostic REDEEMER MYTH

*James Dunn on pages 125 and 126 of Christology in the Making informs us that "these passages were written in the middle of the first century, and the most obvious and really clear meaning is the Adam theology and christology widespread in earliest Christianity. In short, **Adam Christology** provides not only a plausible context of thought for Phil 2:6-11 but also **the most plausible context** of thought. Alternative explanations in terms of a Gnostic or proto-Gnostic Primal Man speculation are not only unnecessary but also unconvincing...we have uncovered no real evidence that the concept of a heavenly archetype of Adam had developed beyond that of a Platonic idea by the time of Paul – no real evidence, in other words, of an already established belief in a heavenly first man who became the redeemer of Adam's offspring"*

*Further confirmation of this understanding is given by Karl-Josef Kuschel who says: "So this text would have been a piece of **Adam Christology**, of the kind that also emerges in other contexts in the New Testament. It would be a further example of the widespread **two stage Christology** of the earliest Jewish-Christian communities...and thus would not be in the context of mythical tradition, but of Old Testament tradition. So there is no question here of a pre-existent heavenly figure. Rather Christ is the great contrasting figure to Adam." p251 of 'Born Before All Time'*

#### NOT A PAST TENSE 'WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD'

In vs 6 of the Greek, Jesus is described as "existing (**being** ) in the **form** of God." It does not say 'was', 'was existing' or 'existed'. 'Being' is used in Young's Literal, KJV, NKJV, NJB and NIV

*'Being is a **present participle** and doesn't define any particular time. Therefore, pre-existence is not being spoken of here.'* Karl-Josef Kuschel. Examples are: "being a prophet" (Acts 2:30) "If you being a Jew". (Gal 2:14). These do not mean being so before birth or ceasing to be so.

#### 'MORPHE' HAS A WIDE SPAN OF MEANINGS

By Koine times '**morphe**' had come to have the meaning of "**station in life**, a position one holds, one's rank. And that is an approximation of morphe in this context [Phil 2]" 'The practical use of the Greek New Testament.' p 84 Kenneth Wuest.

The context confirms this understanding because 'being a slave' is per se, a matter of **STATUS** rank, or position.

In modern English the word **metamorphosis** can involve the change in appearance of a person e.g. weight-loss, or a change in a person's character or function. But they are still a human and they have not undergone a change to a radically different substance.

'Morphe' does not carry the thought of change **in the metaphysical** sense i.e. the substance or essence of something

The contrast is:

'Being in the morphe of God' = 'an expression of **divinity**' Bauer's Greek Lexicon

'Being in the morphe of a slave' = 'an expression of **servility**;' " " "

Additionally : morphe

= 'the form by which a person or thing strikes **the vision** ; the **external** appearance'. Thayer

= '**external** appearance'. Gerhard Kittel's Theological Dictionary of NT

= '**outward** appearance'. Walter Bauer's Greek Lexicon

'Morphe' and 'eikon' (image) are near synonyms. F.W.Eltester has shown that 'eikon' and 'morphe' are used as interchangeable terms in the LXX. "The absolute fidelity of Christ justified the choice of an alternative term (*morphe* rather

than eikon), and permitted the contrast between morphe theou and morphe doulou." Jerome Murphy O'Connor.

So Jesus' "being in the image / form of God" means that, as the human Messiah, he was the **visible image** of God, having **divine status**. As Son of God he had the **right to function as God** as had the rulers in Israel who functioned as 'gods' (Ps 82:6 ; John 10:34). Eg "See I have made you [ Moses ] God to Pharaoh" Ex 7:1. Also in Mark 2:7 the scribes state : "who can forgive sins except one, God ?" Yet this authority was delegated to Jesus by God as vs 10 says "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth." Jesus was also granted authority to raise the dead. (John 5:21). Further, "all judgment has been entrusted to the Son" (John 5:22,23). Therefore he functions as God but is not of God's essence or substance.

Note: To convey the idea of 'essential nature' one would have to use the word 'eidos' not 'morphe'

#### WHY DID JESUS NOT GRASP AT EQUALITY WITH GOD?

Jesus "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped (harpagmos)."

"something that was not possessed and so grasped at, or something already possessed and so **grasped retentively** (the ambiguity of harpagmos)" P116 of 'Christology in the Making'.

Satan offered Jesus "all the Kingdoms of the world" in exchange for Satan worship. Yet Jesus refused; thereby refusing to grasp for **an equality with God in respect to world rulership** that was his by right but only when given by God at the appropriate juncture in His purpose. Similarly, Satan told Eve that she could '**be like God**' – having the same **status** as God because of the premature and inappropriate acquisition of power through knowledge. Genesis 3:5. After **Adam's sin** God said "the man has become **like one of us in knowing good and evil**" 3:22. This was a snatching at equality with God in respect to knowledge prematurely and offered by Satan rather than God.

The notes on this verse in the New American Bible say "Many see an allusion to the Genesis story: Unlike Adam, Jesus, though... in the form of God, did not reach out for equality with God, in **contrast to the first Adam**."

Theologian Karl-Joseph Kuschel similarly explains that this "hymn does **not speak of the pre-existence of Christ** at all....but in good Jewish fashion as the counterpart of **Adam**...His sinless condition gave him the right to be treated **as if he were God**."

James Mackey states that "there is scarcely enough difference between the Greek words *eikon* and *morphe* to prevent us from seeing in the Genesis

creation and garden stories the source of our two phrases: man created in God's image and likeness and **grasping after some status of equality** with God ('become like one of us', 'be like God').

#### WHAT DOES 'EMPTIED HIMSELF' MEAN?

*It is often stated that Jesus emptied himself of himself or of his 'divinity' (Trinitarian) or 'god-form' (Arian) as if this were his essence. But as discussed above the 'form' (morphē) is synonymous with image (eikon) and has the 1<sup>st</sup> century Koine meaning of 'status' which is why Paul gives the comparison with "form of a slave" and not 'form of a man'. The phrase "form of a slave" makes no reference to one's essence or essential being but of one's lowly status. Adam being in the image of God certainly was not of God's essential being. A basic difference in Jewish thinking and Greek thinking of the time was that Jews thought in terms of 'FUNCTION' and would use a great deal of metaphorical language; whereas Greeks thought more in terms of essence or substance, that is ontologically (substance) or metaphysically. Many scholars have now recognized this difference and have adjusted their interpretations accordingly.*

The phrase "**emptied himself**" (Greek 'ekenosen') is also translated as: "but made himself of no reputation" KJV, NKJ. or "but made himself nothing" ESV, NIV. It is a parallel thought to "**poured out his soul to the death**" Isaiah 53:12. "**'kenos'** -- divested himself of his prestige or privileges. Phil 2:7...An early Christian confession holds that the kenosis is not the incarnation but the cross [ Isa 53:12 ]." Bauer's Greek Lexicon of NT Literature.

*This was a matter of self-renunciation by Jesus including divesting himself of his right to incorruptibility that was his because of his sinless condition.*

#### WHEN DID JESUS 'EMPTY HIMSELF'?

*The NWT of verse 7 "**emptied himself and took a slave's form**" gives the incorrect impression that he emptied himself first and then became a slave; whereas, the Greek grammatical structure is: "**himself he emptied form of slave having taken**". This shows that Jesus emptied himself because he had already or at that point in time "**taken a slave's form**". Also the word 'and' as used in the NWT changes the correct order of events; yet this word does not exist in the Greek and is not implied as Ernst Lohmeyer states. The correct structure also fits with the context, giving the meaning that Jesus, having become slave-like then immediately began emptying (daily sacrificing) himself.*

*Lohmeyer's translation reads : "**but sacrificed himself having taken the form of a slave**"*

*The 'sacrificing' would have been Jesus' entire life course leading to his death.*

"In this case the aorist 'ekenosen' (he emptied himself) does **not refer to a single moment** of 'incarnation' but the completeness of **a series of repeated acts**; his earthly life, looked at as a whole, was an unending process of self-emptying." A.H. McNeile. former Regius Professor of Divinity.

"We have here an "emptying" related directly to the terrestrial condition of Christ..." Jerome Murphy O'Connor.

*Therefore in his life course Jesus (Messiah-the man) laid aside such rightful dignity, prerogatives, privileges, and rulership; humbling himself to live a life of servitude which ended with his death. Would the Philippians be asked to copy the impossible example of emptying themselves of **their essence**? Rather, they were to 'empty' themselves of their contentious, egotistical and selfish nature and imitate Jesus' lifetime example of humility and self-sacrifice. Paul does not appeal to us to be like an archangel or heavenly being. He appeals to us to be humble servants as humans. Additional context is shown when he says in Philippians 2:17 : "I (Paul) am being **poured out** like a drink offering upon the **sacrifice and public service** to which faith has led you." Yet Paul's essence was not poured out.*

*From 1860, a Lutheran theologian - Gotfried Thomasius began what has now developed into the **false doctrine of kenosis** i.e. that Christ emptied himself of **his essence**. **This seems to be the first time that Philippians 2:7 was applied in this way**. It appears that the main reason for the development of this doctrine by trinitarians was to explain how Jesus could be God and man without postulating two centres of consciousness as in the doctrine of the hypostatic union.*

*The New International Dictionary of NT Words asks: "Does Phil 2:7 really imply kenoticism ?*

*Neither the Gospels nor Phil 2 presents the picture of the abandonment of any divine attributes" Phil 2:7 does, however, show Jesus accepting the **status** and role of a servant. (Mark 10:45; Luke 22: 27; John 13:3-16; 15:20). This dictionary does, however, show belief in pre-existence, but for other reasons.*

**WHAT DOES 'TAKING THE FORM OF A BOND-SERVANT' MEAN?**

*All heavenly beings, including the archangel Michael, have always been servants of God. So this passage cannot apply to any heavenly being who supposedly became the human baby Jesus. That is, it does not refer to any change from 'spirit' to 'flesh and blood'. Rather "Taking the form of a bond-servant" means 'Taking the status of a bond-servant' with the attitude of mind (vs 5) or disposition of a servant. So Jesus, although being the Messiah, took on **the status of fallen mankind** and did not take up his rights and privileges as Messiah but **was servant-like**. There is no thought here of changing into the substance of a*

human; neither is any location change indicated; but the simple accepting of a lowly status by one who by right has a high status.

A growing number of theologians are seeing this passage as being not about pre-existence but being expressed within the confines of a two stage christology:

1) Jesus is born and lives his life in humility until death. 2) He is resurrected and exalted.

So Jesus' "**having become in the likeness of men**" means that he grew up to be a man just as other men do. The phrase is effectively saying 'having grown up to become a man' Luke 2:40. It is "Not by becoming a man from being something else (no one can do that), but by becoming fully and completely human." 'The Human Face of God'. p88. J.A.T Robinson. Also "Luther....recognized.... that Christ had to become a person through the normal process of maturation and moral growth." p 79. *ibid.*

As a MORTAL it is impossible that Jesus had previously existed as an IMMORTAL i.e.as an angel or heavenly being (Luke 20:36). However Jesus was **only like** other men; and not the same as them because they needed to be reconciled to God, whereas he did not.

Again the phrase about Jesus' "**having been found in fashion (schema) as (a) man.**" has no metaphysical meaning. Similar to morphe '**schema**' means: 1) the generally recognized state or form in which something appears, outward appearance, form or shape. And 2) the functional aspect of something., way of life, of things; 'this world in its present form is passing away' 1 Cor 7:31" Bauer's Lexicon. Yet the world of mankind will not have a change of the physical substance of which it is made but of its character and manner of operation. The Diaglott renders this as "and being in condition as a man" and REB renders it as "sharing the human lot."

So according to Dunn it means that "Christ is being evaluated as Adam - as representative man, as one with fallen man." (the 'a' does not apply). Further, Lohmeyer renders vs 8 "and [though] being found as Son of Man.." This verse is alternatively rendered as: "having been found in the human scheme of things" or as "having been found in the human condition."

Possibly this refers to the time that Jesus came to manhood at about 30 years of age and then presented himself for a baptism that led to his full servant-hood – a life of sacrifice.

A PARAPHRASE BASED ON JEREMIAS'

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE PHILIPPIANS HYMN

**STROPHE I:** As the Righteous Man par excellence Christ was the perfect image of God. He was totally what God intended man to be. His sinless condition gave him the right to be treated as if he were god, that is, to enjoy the incorruptibility in which Adam was created. This right, however, he did not use to his own advantage, but he gave himself over to the consequences of a mode of existence that was not his by accepting the condition of a slave which involved suffering and death,

**STROPHE II:** Though in his human nature Christ was identical with other men, he in fact differed from them because, unlike them, he had no need to be reconciled with God. Nonetheless, he humbled himself in obedience and accepted death.

**STROPHE III:** Therefore, God exalted him above all the just who were promised a kingdom, and transferred to him the title and the authority that had hitherto been God's alone. He is the Kyrios whom every voice must confess and to whom every knee must bow."

Jerome Murphy O'Connor.

## THE CONCLUSIONS OF LEADING BIBLE SCHOLARS

### REGARDING PHILIPPIANS 2

"From this fact that the Jewish rather than Hellenistic syncretism may be the key to understanding the Philippians hymn, present day exegetes have drawn the radically opposite conclusion that the Philippians hymn does **not speak of the pre-existence of Christ at all.**"

Karl-Josef Kuschel p250 "Born Before All Time"

"The picture is **not of a celestial figure** lowering himself to become a man, to be exalted still higher than he was before. Rather, it is that the entire fullness of God was enabled...to find embodiment in one who was completely one of us as any other descendant of Abraham."

J A T Robinson. p166 "*The Human Face of God*"

"The fact that in the context of the hymn in the actual epistle there is **no mention at all of this anonymous divine figure** who becomes man..."

*James P. Mackey. p52 "The Christian Experience of God as Trinity."*

"But of pre-existence and equality of being with God we **cannot discover any trace in Paul's letters**" Bas van Iersel, p45. '*Son of God in the New Testament.*'

"Philippians 2:6 is primarily concerned with making statements about high status and **by no means necessarily concerned with pre-existence.**" Klaus Berger. *Heidelberg exegete*.

"**No pre-existence** of Christ before the world with an independent significance can be recognized even **in Phil. 2.**" Anton Vogtle. *Freiburg exegete*.

"Moreover it can readily be seen that the outline of thought in the Philippian hymn fully matches the **two-stage Christology** evident elsewhere in first generation Christianity. – free acceptance of man's lot followed out to death, and exaltation to the status of Lord over all."

James Dunn. p115. *Christology in the Making*.

*Recommended reading.*

Christology in the Making. James Dunn. Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham.

Born Before all Time. Karl Joseph Kuschel. Catholic theologian at the University of Tübingen.

The Human Face of God. John A.T Robinson. Leading Protestant theologian in the UK

The Christian Experience of God as Trinity. James P. Mackey. Professor of Divinity.

Christological Anthropology in Phil.,II, 6-11.

Jerome Murphy O'Connor. Renowned Catholic Exegete