

Did Jesus Empty Himself of Any Divine Attributes?

by Servetus the Evangelical

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi, exhorting them to be humble and love one another (Philippians 2.1-4). Then he added what all modern scholars insist is a pre-existing hymn whose composer remains unknown. Paul introduces this hymn by telling readers, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (v. 5). Then he begins the hymn by saying, “who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men ...” (vv. 6-7).

Philippians 2.6-11 has had a most profound impact on the history of Christology. H.E. Todt says of it, “Christological doctrine has been developed in Protestantism mainly with regard to the concepts expressed in Phil. 2. The synoptic texts were interpreted to conform to this passage.” It should have been vice versa.

Consequently, Philippians 2.6-11 has been hotly debated among modern scholars. N.T. Wright says the main reason is that it “is one of the most notoriously complex passages” in all of Paul’s New Testament (NT) letters. Due to the necessary brevity of this article, we will only be able to scratch the surface of this scholarly discussion.

Two contrasting interpretations of Philippians 2.6-11 have prevailed among scholars. The traditional “incarnational” or “preexistent interpretation,” which still dominates to the present, means that vv. 6-7 presents Jesus as personally existing in heaven prior to his earthly life and being equal with God the Father. The “anthropological” or “human interpretation,” which is gaining favor with scholars, means that vv. 6-8 refers only to Jesus’ earthly life and therefore has nothing to do with preexistence or incarnation.

Those who adopt the preexistent interpretation of this Philippians 2 hymn view it in three stages: preexistence in v. 6, incarnation in vv. 7-8, and heavenly exaltation in vv. 9-11. They interpret “form of God” in v. 6 as Jesus having preexisted eternally as a distinct *hypostasis* or Person, being the Logos of John 1.1-18, by possessing the same divine nature as that of God the Father, which makes him equal with the Father.

How one interprets the expression, “in the form of God” (Gr. *en morphe theou*), largely determines the interpretation of the remainder of the hymn. This critical phrase is difficult partly because, except for cognates, *morphe* (“form”) occurs only twice in the Greek NT, both being here in vv. 6-7. In most Greek literature, *morphe* means “outward appearance,” that is, what can be perceived only by the senses. So, “form of God” seems to refer to Jesus’ bodily existence rather than a pre-temporal, ontological preexistence.

Proponents of the human interpretation of Philippians 2.6-11 have searched the Old Testament (OT) for links to this hymn as the key to understanding its author’s intended meaning. Thus, they link Jesus existing “in the form of God” with Adam being made in the “image (of God),” as in Genesis 1.27; 5.3. In support, Paul elsewhere describes Jesus as God’s “image” (Greek *eikon*; 2 Corinthians 4.4; Col 1.15). Accordingly, the hymn begins by saying Jesus was in the image of God, like Adam, called Adam Christology.

What does the hymn mean by saying that Jesus “did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped”? Scholars who adopt the preexistent interpretation usually insist it means that prior to Jesus’ incarnation, as the Logos, he possessed “equality with God”

and relinquished it at the moment of incarnation. But if the Logos could have grasped at equality with God, He did not possess it and thus could not have been equal with God.

Proponents of the human interpretation of this hymn link “equality with God” to “like God” in Genesis 3.5. Recall that Adam sinned because Satan deceived Eve, saying that if she ate the forbidden fruit, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” This lie means they could attain “equality with God” regarding knowledge and wisdom (v. 6).

What does the hymn mean by saying that Jesus “emptied Himself”? Proponents of the preexistent interpretation of the hymn have understood this mostly in one of two ways, that at Jesus’ incarnation he divested himself of his relative divine attributes or he merely chose not to exercise some of them during his incarnation. These suggestions are called Kenotic Christology because the root word for “emptied” in the Greek text is *kenosis*. But either of these suggestions raises serious problems. A divesture of any of these divine attributes—for example, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence—would have been necessary because they are incompatible with being human, yet such divesture necessarily results in something less than full deity.

Some proponents of the human interpretation have linked “emptied Himself” (Gr. *heauton ekenosen*) with “poured out Himself to death” (Heb. *nephesho lamoot herah*) in Isaiah 53.12. Joachim Jeremias convincingly championed this background for the hymn. He said of these words in Philippians 2.7, “The use of Is. 53:12 shows that the expression *heauton ekenosen* implies the surrender of life, not the *kenosis* of the incarnation.”

Indeed, Paul introduced this hymn by saying, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind” (Philippians 2.3), which he says was Jesus’ attitude (v. 5). Therefore, Paul likely understood this hymn to mean that Jesus emptied Himself of self by submitting to God’s plan for his life. It is the cross of Christ, not incarnation, which is the epitome of Jesus’ self-denial depicted in the NT. And it is only in this sense, rather than incarnation, that Paul can legitimately set forth an example for his readers to follow. Therefore, Jesus did not deny himself by laying aside or suppressing certain divine attributes at his birth, but by doing acts of moral character throughout his life that culminated in death on a cross, resulting in salvation for all those who believe in him.

In my book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ*, I devote 21 pages to the interpretation of Philippians 2.5-11. In doing so, I cite 45 scholars and their works plus 4 church fathers.