

The Son from Above¹

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Abstract

This paper is a theological comparative study of the two New Testament texts: Philippians 2 and John 1. These portrayals of the Son of God show the common ground of communion, divinity, and of coming down to us, but also show the particularities of revelation, life, humility, and honor. These glimpses of the Son from above are the starting point for a New Testament understanding of God, history of salvation, and life in the family of God and in the city.

Keywords

Christ, Son, honor, humility, obedience, church, unity, revelation, life

Introduction

This paper is in the area of New Testament Christology. It is a comparison study on some of the main christological texts, namely, Philippians 2 and John 1. The main Christological outlook of New Testament is present in these texts, so this study will help in understanding of

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what we have in this area of New Testament study. These samples illuminate the concepts and the contexts in which New Testament tackles this subject. The area covered is large, Pauline and Johanne communities at worship and reflection. I will approach them in the accepted historical order of their writing: Philippians 2 and John 1. I will focus on their specific outlook, their relationship with the supposed intended setting, their common ground, and their particularities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the variety of ways in which Christ was seen and integrated in the early Christian matrix.

Philippians 2:5-11: The Christ event and life as a citizen

This is not a text about Christ as such, for the sake of Christ, but a text in which the thinking/the mindset of Christ is a model to be implemented among and in the members of the church at Philippi.² If this, or a version of this hymn, was part of the early Christian worship it can be easily seen the development of thought and understanding in the first generation of Christians. Between the scenes in the Gospels and the sayings of Jesus, and a text like this about Christ there is a long way in terms of concepts, images, argument and relevance. The particularities of understanding and depiction have to receive full attention for offering

² For a similar interpretation see M. Sydney Park, *Submission Within the Godhead and the Church in the Epistle to the Philippians, an Exegetical and Theological Examination of the Concept of Submission in Philippians 2 and 3*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 361 (London: T&T Clark, 2007). 32; see also the discussion in Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). 90; see also Davorin Peterlin, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. LXXIX (Leiden: Brill, 1995). 66-67.

a way forward in unpacking a mindset and its relevancy for others. This overall perspective of Christ's mindset/thinking has to be the main point of interpretation throughout the exposition.

The existence of him is described as 'being in a state, normally with the implication of a particular set of circumstances' (ὕπαρχω, LN 13.5); the particularities of this lexical choice are that the focus is not on 'possessing certain characteristics, whether inherent or transitory' (εἶμί, 'to be', LN 13.1), or 'to possess certain characteristics, with the implication of their having been acquired' (γίνομαι, LN 13.3; we will have that in 2:7), or 'to be in a state involving various aspects' (περίκειμαι, LN 13.6), or 'to be in a state which has not been anticipated (εὐρίσκομαι, LN 13.7). That state, or condition is marked with the help of ἐν which functions here as 'a marker of a state or condition' (LN 13.8). The state of him is μορφῆ θεοῦ. Μορφή can mean 'the nature or character of something, with emphasis upon both the internal and external form' (LN 58.2), or 'a visual form of something' (LN 58.15). The particularities of Paul's/early Christians's choice is seen when we understand it by comparison with other known terms from the same semantic domain; we do not have here 'the essential or basic nature of an entity' (ὕπoστασις, LN 58.1), or 'the form or nature of something, with special reference to its outer form or structure' (σχῆμα, LN 58.7), or 'the nature of something as the result of its natural development or condition' (φύσις, LN 58.8). We have the particularity of nature or character with emphasis on *form*. The phrase μορφῆ θεοῦ does not occur in LXX, and in all Greek literature, classical inscriptions, papyri, from 6th century BC to 1st century AD, occurs only here in Philippians 2:6. So, Paul is a pioneer in speaking like that. The closer we can get to the meaning of it is to see it in some kind of paral-

lelism with the expression ἴσα θεῷ ('equal with God') from 2:6c.³ Paul does not say that him [preexisting Christ] is 'identical to' God (for that he should have used ὁ αὐτός, LN 58.31), or that he is 'of equal significance or value' (ἰσότημος, LN 58.34), or that he 'has the same form as something else' (εἰκῶν, LN 58.35), but that he is 'equal in quality or characteristics' (ἴσος, LN 58.33). Being in the form of God he did not consider (ἡγέομαι, LN 31.1) ἀρπαγμός to be equal with God. I understand ἀρπαγμός as 'that which is to be held on to forcibly' (LN 57.236), and it refers to his status of being equal with God. Equality with God was not to be held on to forcibly. Phil. 2:6 speaks about the reasoning of the preexisting Christ in which he, being in the form of God, does not held on to forcibly to his equality with God. This is what he did not do;⁴ but he did something else.

He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming in the likeness of men. Paul does not say that he [preexisting Christ] was 'caused to be in a low status' (ταπεινώω, LN 87.62), or 'to have less status or rank' (ελαττώω, LN 87.68), or 'to decrease in status or rank' (ἐλαττόομαι, LN 87.69), or 'to have a low status involving dishonor and disrespect' (ἀτιμάζω, LN 87.74), but 'to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank' (κενόω, LN 87.70)⁵. The lexical

³ For a different route and conclusion see Fowl, *Philippians*. 91-94; see also the theological analysis of Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch, 40th Anniversary Edition ed. (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). 61.

⁴ See also Fowl, *Philippians*. 94.

⁵ 'He puts off the form of God, the whole knowability of his being - that is what *ekenose* means.' Barth, *Philippians*. 63.

choice made by Paul shows the radical character of the preexisting Christ's decision;⁶ he eliminated all privileges and prerogatives associated with his status of being equal with God. He became a slave, and a man. This 'complete removal of privileges' is not the same thing as 'taking the form of a slave.' These are successive actions. It is a *movement* at the other end of the spectrum: *from* 'being in the form of God' *to* 'taking the form of a slave,' *from* 'being equal with God' *to* 'becoming like a man.' The high status of divinity is let aside and the low status of a slave is embraced, but the movement does not stop here. He is now a slave that will 'become disgraced and humiliated' (ταπεινώω, LN 25.198). So, in relation to his high divine status we have ἐκένωσεν, but in relation to his status as a man we have ἔταπείνωσεν; in the first stage he removes his high prerogatives, in the second stage he becomes disgraced and humiliated. The coming down is now complete and this movement is in three stages: *from* 'being in the form of God,' or 'being equal with God' *to* 'taking the form of a slave,' or 'becoming like a man,' and *to* 'be put to shame,' to be 'obedient to death' on a cross. Every step of the way he is the subject of the action; it is not something imposed on him but done by him. The high status of divinity is not held by force, and the status of being man is characterized by obedience, even to death on a cross.

The way back is not described as a reverse of the main three steps⁷ of the coming down, but as receiving exceptional honor (ὑπερυψώω, LN 87.16). The coming down is for good in the sense that it

⁶ Contra Fowl, *Philippians*. 96.

⁷ For a reading in steps of the hymn, see also Barth, *Philippians*. 65.

proves a mindset. ἐκένωσεν, and ἔταπείνωσεν are followed by ὑπερύψωσεν. After obedience to death it follows honor. It is an honor in view of his high status. Because of what he did, God gave him exceptional honor. Christ is viewed by God as 'being exceptionally honored in view of high status.' God did not 'attribute high status to Christ by honoring' (τιμάω, δοξάζω, LN 87.8), or 'to show particular honor to Christ as the result of some type of victory' (στεφανόω, LN 87.13), or 'to show respect to Christ on the basis of his importance (μεγαλύω, 87.15). The honor given to Christ by God has in view his high status. This a reference which goes both ways: to the preexisting state, and to the post crucifixion state; he had a high status before incarnation and has a high status after the crucifixion. Resurrection as such is not mention, but it is described in terms of honoring. This honoring has in view the name received by Christ. This is a name above all names and before him every knee shall bow. We hear the echo from Isaiah 45.23 (LXX), one of the strongest monotheistic texts in Scripture. That echo is now in relation to the honored Christ. Now his high status is not viewed through the lenses of μορφῆ θεοῦ or ἴσα θεῶ, but through the view of the name above all names: κύριος, the Lord.⁸ Christ is seen as Lord, and God is seen as Father. Christ is the one 'who exercises supernatural authority over mankind' (κύριος, LN 12.9), and God is the 'one who combines aspects of supernatural authority and care for his people' (πατήρ, LN 12.12). When Christ the Lord is worshiped, God the Father is glorified.

⁸ For the Roman political background, see the analysis in Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi, Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). 152-153.

For the Church in Philippi, Christ is the model to be followed.⁹ His mindset shows that high status is not incompatible with humility and obedience, neither humility and obedience with honor. This is ground breaking for a Roman colony with a Roman army veteran elite.¹⁰ The high status is something to be used for others, and because of that, honor and authority will be received. Honor and authority are gifts bestowed by God, and they go hand in hand with humility and obedience.¹¹

John 1:1-18: The incarnated λόγος and the revelation of God

The beginning of everything is depicted from the point of view of the Logos. He is the main character in everything.¹² His portrait is build with focus on his existence, communion and nature. When everything was made, he was already there. 'Beginning' is in relation to what was

⁹ For a feminist interpretation of how the divine model has to be applied to Philippian community see the argument of Joseph A. Marchal, *Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation, a Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Academia Biblica, vol. 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006). 134-137.

¹⁰ For the relevance of the cultural values and social codes of the Roman Philippi, see Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor*. 153-154.

¹¹ For a different analysis in which God's sovereignty, soteriology, ethics and revelation of divine identity are in view, see Park, *Submission in Philippians 2 and 3*. 37; our argument is close to that of Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor*. 154; 'the account of Jesus contains a powerful message to those who abuse their status.' Peterlin, *Philippians*.67.

¹² For the place of the Prologue in the development of John's plot see R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel, a Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). 89-90.

created, not to him; for he *was* there in the beginning.¹³ Describing him as λόγος presupposes multilayered elements from the areas of revelation¹⁴ and creative power: he is making God known, and he is the agent through whom everything came into being.¹⁵ His existence at the moment of the beginning gives him authority over the created things. He is not only a witness of the beginning, but also the agent through whom the beginning took place. The difference between John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1 is that there the beginning is depicted from God's point of view who created the heavens and the earth, and here, even if God the Father creates everything, it is underlined the agency of the λόγος. The same event, from different perspectives.

This communion with God¹⁶ is shown in what follows. Communion with God is mentioned for underling both the personal character of the λόγος, and the possibility of full revelation. Only somebody close to

¹³. See also Urban C von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John, Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). 2.

¹⁴. For a detailed study on the theme of revelation in John see John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, Second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). 305-329.

¹⁵. See also the analysis in C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). 266-267; 'the predication of eternity is involved in the clause.' WM. Milligan, Moulton, WM. F., *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1898). 3; for a recent analysis about the relationship with Philo's 'Logos theology' see the analysis of Harold W. Attridge, *Essays on John and Hebrews*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament, vol. 264 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). 47-58.

¹⁶. The 'dynamism of this relationship' is seen as mutual by Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word, Reading the Fourth Gospel: John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). 28.

God the Father can make him fully known. Also there is the status element: somebody in communion with God the Father has come into the world.

These perspectives of existence and communion are completed¹⁷ with that of nature of the λόγος. The way λόγος is described is at the maximum level possible in a monotheistic context. θεός is the way in which the Logos is distinct from the Father showing in the same time his quality as God.¹⁸ He is sharing fully and distinctively in Godhead, that is why, he can be described as θεός.

These three essential perspectives are given as building one on top of the other. The term at the end of each affirmation is the term at the beginning of the next: λόγος - λόγος, θεός - θεός. This affirmation shows clearly the intended climax: the λόγος as God. This λόγος, and no other, is he who was in the beginning with God. To establish his identity in these terms is essential for the following argument in the whole Gospel.

The mediation in relation to creation of everything is the idea developed further. All things have been made through him, and from what has been made, nothing has been made without him. All by the λόγος, nothing without the λόγος; this is the decisive affirmation at this point. The relationship between the realities of John 1:1 and λόγος's character as agent in creation of all things is given through the main concept for which the whole Gospel is written: life.¹⁹ Because he is who he is, and be-

¹⁷. See also Milligan, *John*. 4.

¹⁸. 'This equates the Word with God.' von Wahlde, *John*. 3.

¹⁹. See also Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life, a Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand

cause through him all things have been made, he has the life in himself. Based on this affirmation John will develop the theme of revelation. The life from²⁰ him was the the light of men. The humankind is in darkness, and almost all of them did not perceived the light to life within him.²¹ Here is the start of a tragic aspect developed further in the Gospel, that of rejection; the incarnated *λόγος* has come into the world, the world did not knew him, and his own people did not accepted him.

In the description of the coming down of the Light there is a witness: John the Baptist. His narrative role is similar to that of the wise men from the East and that of the shepherds in the other Gospels. He is sent by God to witness about the Light. The narrative profile of the Light can be given through three main observations: a) the coming of Light into the world is part of the judgment theme (3:19); 'people love darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil; all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light.' b) witnessing the Light is part of the life of discipleship ('Whoever follows me will never walk into the darkness but will have the light of life.' 8:12) and c) while you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light (12:36). So, witnessing the Light means entering into a conflict (you witness what people hate); it is part of the life of discipleship, and gradually you become what you witness, you become a child of the Light.

Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008). 30-31.

²⁰. See the analysis in von Wahlde, *John*. 4.

²¹. This is one of the results in which is described the incarnation of the Word; cf. *Ibid.* 5.

When the λόγος comes into the world he is seen as the true light. This leads to delimitations. Because people loved the darkness more than the light they do not come to the light (their deeds are evil), but some will accept the λόγος as it is depicted in John 1: existence in the beginning, in communion with God the Father, God, and Light. This acceptance will be seen at two levels in people's lives: a) at judicial level leading to adoption, and b) at moral level leading to regeneration. The coming of the Light is a coming to his own; this coming is a coming into creation whose mediator is him, and also this is a coming to his people, Israel. Because he came as Light he is rejected. The love for darkness leads to hate for the light. In this way those who reject him, reject the light of life. Even if this light lights all people, not all accept the Light.²²

But there are some who do accept the Light. This receiving of the Light leads to changes of status and character. These changes are described following the virgin birth pattern of Jesus Christ in the other Gospels. Birth from God is the result of the work of the Spirit.²³ This work is described in chapters 3 and 16. The birth from above/being born again/birth from the Spirit is happening as a result of the work of the Spirit as a prosecutor. The Spirit proves the world guilty in relation to their sins, their righteousness, and judgment. Those who accept the Light receive the authority/the right to be children of God (adoption into his family), and experiment the change in life. In this way the argu-

^{22.} For the conflict between belief and unbelief as responses to Jesus see Culpepper, *Anatomy*. 97-98.

^{23.} See also von Wahlde, *John*. 7.

ment of the Prologue focuses on the establishing of a strong relationship between God and people.²⁴

The entering of the λόγος among people is described in terms of a major change²⁵ of state: becoming σάρξ.²⁶ The existence in the flesh²⁷ is the new way of being of the λόγος. This change of condition is extraordinary. The life in the flesh is described as the rising of a tent in the neighborhood. This perspective on the λόγος's condition is understood at multiple levels: on the one hand there is the metaphor of traveler who is rising his tent in different places, and on the other there is an echo²⁸ of rising the Tent of the Meeting after the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 40:34). In that Tent they saw the glory of God coming down.²⁹ So, John 1:14 is somewhat polemic showing a change of the Tabernacle: the tent in which the divine glory³⁰ is seen is the incarnated λόγος. He is unique.³¹ He is the 'only one of this kind' (μονογενής) sent by the Fa-

²⁴ For an understanding of the Prologue moving towards a climax (1:1-18) see Dodd, *Interpretation*. 272; see also the perspective of Milligan, *John*. 2.

²⁵ For a different understanding see *Ibid.* 8.

²⁶ 'The preexistent Word, in becoming flesh, can be the communication and revelation of God in the human situation.' Moloney, *Belief*. 42.

²⁷ 'The realm of human.' von Wahlde, *John*. 10.

²⁸ Also echoes Sir 24:8 where Wisdom is ordered to 'pitch her tent' in Jacob (see also *1 En.* 42:1; *Bar* 3:38).

²⁹ 'Jesus, as the fourth evangelist sees him, is the *plan* of God, his grand project for humanity.' Ashton, *Fourth Gospel*. 329; see also Koester, *Word of Life*. 99.

³⁰ 'One's glory can be said to be one's identity and reality as made manifest.' von Wahlde, *John*. 11.

³¹ Also *Ibid.* 11.

ther; something similar will be shown in 3:16 ('God... gave his *only* Son.').³²

His dwelling among us was full of grace and truth.³³ The theme of grace is not developed beyond the Prologue in this Gospel. The only aspects we have are those of abundance, and the contrast with the Law of Moses. But the theme of truth is well developed and is a theme with an open horizon following the rhetorical question asked by Pilate in 18:38: 'What is the truth?' The eyewitness have saw, about the truth, in the life of the incarnated *λόγος*, the following teaching: the man who lives according to the truth will come to the light, true worshipers of God are those who worship the Father in Spirit and truth; when truth is know it leads to freedom, the Son of God is the truth, his ministry is continued by the Spirit of truth, and the holiness of the disciples is possible through the truth. The coming in the world of the Son from above was to witness about the truth.

At the end, the Prologue develops a theme given at the beginning: the theme of communion. The unique communion of the Son gives him the possibility of making the Father fully known.³⁴ This fact is talked about in a polemical context with the revelation received by Moses: the Law. Through him, who is close to the Father's heart, the grace and the truth have come. The incarnated *λόγος* described as *μονογενής θεός*,

³² For the main framework of John's Christology given by 'logos' and 'rabbi' see D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). 91-93.

³³ This can be an echo of Exod 34:6; cf. Koester, *Word of Life*. 100.

³⁴ This will lead the reader into the prose narrative that follows. cf. Moloney, *Belief*. 50.

being in the bosom of the Father, has made him known.³⁵ Thus, the themes of communion and divinity are linked together again, and based on this it is underlined the high quality of revelation.

Conclusion

These two early christological texts show the diversity of approaches in exploring the coming down of the Son from above. At Philippi, in a context in which the categories of honor and shame had an important word to say in understanding the life of a citizen, there is a depiction of Christ which is intended to open new paths and offer new perspectives. High status is not incompatible with humility, neither obedience with honor. Actually Christ has received the name above all names, the name of Lord, based on his humility and obedience. That is why, living as a citizen a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ is leading to honor, but to an honor which is based on humility and obedience, not on arrogance and pride. At Ephesus, through a multilayered argument, the incarnated *λόγος* is center stage for any understandings of life in the family of God, of creation, and of revelation. Through a complex interwoven of the main ideas of existence, communion, and divinity, the incarnated *λόγος*, though rejected by many, is the path to enlightened life out of the darkness.

³⁵. 'As *logos* Jesus Christ is anchored in God.' Smith, *Theology*. 91.

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