

An Ontological Hymn



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Philippians 2:5-11

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Paul's mysticism and practice join together in this (possibly borrowed) hymn. Paul, addressing the Philippian church, invites them (us) into a poetic song of theological and ontological depth, perhaps unmatched anywhere in scripture. Appealing to our consciousness (mind), Paul invites us into joining the path of existence forged by Christ Jesus.

It is notable that the word Christ precedes the name Jesus. In Paul's writings, 'Christ' is the uniqueness of Jesus' life (every emotion, thought, experience) all gathered up and shared with the Father) so that all that it means to be human is become part of God, his father. It is the unity of Father and son in in a hitherto (until now) yet unknown experience – being human. In Christ Jesus, God embraced humanity into God's self. If you will, there has been a change, an ontological change, in God; this change in no way affects the character of God.

The mystery of the incarnation is (in part) that God can become a human being while withholding from the human being (Jesus) all that it means to be God. This 'withholding' would be a constant moment by moment act of God. We think in terms of parts and separation, however, let us, remember the unity of God; Hear O Israel Yhwh our God, Yhwh is one. Yet, God's consciousness, or Spirit, has emptied God's self (the son) of all that it means to be God until all that is left is the image of God in a human being. In this sense we can say that in Jesus, God became a human being without exception. However, this human being is unique (*monogenes*) for his ontological origins are not newly created but purely divine.ⁱ He is the last Adam, the progenitor of a redeemed humanity. Time is interrupted with this pinnacle event and humanity is to become a new creation - to be born again. God has joined the creation, become the creature (human) and now the creature (humanity) can be joined to God in Christ Jesus the Lord.

So, God withheld from God's self 'voluntarily' out of love and desire for humanity, all that it means to be God. The omnific God (father) remains 'in the heavens' while the manifest wisdom and word of God enters creation in the son as a child of Mary. This descent is portrayed as continuous in the life of Jesus throughout the first half of the hymn (vs. 5-8). The second half of the hymn, the ascent is Verses 9-11.

We are godlike, destined for eternity as the children of God. We, like God, can create our own reality within the confines of the physical creation; we have failed horrendously.ⁱⁱ In our lives only a faith act that holds God as Lord above all of the present trauma of existence is capable of kissing eternity. This was accomplished by Jesus' obedience.

However, if we are to enjoy being 'in Christ', we, like Jesus, must let go of our self-conscious desires and enter into the life of God that is binding God's self to creation through promises and in particular through the person of Jesus. This path of humility is not a self-serving path, but an obedience to the self-revealing God in Jesus Christ who walked a path of love that led to a cross of rejection.

Our cross is not identical to Jesus' cross. When Paul metaphorically calls us to pick up our cross, he expects us to identify the calling of God in our particular lives that requires of us an obedience to God that subjects us to personal loss, to ridicule, to being misunderstood, to purposefully choosing the path that leads to life over the temporary desires of the present. This is

a calling to an ethically religious life filled with choices, dilemmas, and possible suffering for our obedience. Love bleeds, it empties the life out of us in a world of brokenness; beware of those who have no tears as they deliver their judgments and decrees.

Summary Statement

Philippians 2:7a ... but emptied himself,

When the Lord descended, he emptied himself of all that it means to be God until all that was left, was the image of God existent in all developing human beings. God was able to become a human being because we bear the image of God. Jesus was human without exception. Yet, he was uniquely the son of God for his existence was not created like ours, but divine. He was fully human and let go of all that it means to be God. He was the divine God man and revealed God in his life and teachings.

Writing Theology

When writing theology, we articulate the teaching of scripture without quoting scripture. For example, the following verse contains two of the major themes found in the summary statement. The concept of descent and Jesus' self-appellation *son of man* (rather than son of David). Son of Man is Jesus' stating that he is a human being.

John 3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Continuing

Human beings were created in the image and likeness of God. Image is the distinctively finer attributes of being human such as love, language, mercy, compassion, kindness, insight, a moral conscience, and self-sacrifice. Likeness is our ability to create reality, to say yes or no even to God. God cannot become a cow because the cow would cease to be a cow. God can become a human being because, as creatures, we bear God's likeness and image.

Imagine the process of self-realization that Jesus experienced as he grew from an infant to a young adult! The stories he would have heard from his mother and aunt (John the Baptist's mother) about his origins would have caused both awe and wonder in a young boy. It is also apparent that Jesus was watched over by God (his father). The suffering servant songs of Isaiah affirm that Jesus was possessive of a sensitive ear for hearing God. Although Jesus was human without exception, he was nurtured by his family and his heavenly father. Jesus also had the benefit of the scriptures.

Is. 50:4

*The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.*

Jesus' self-awareness is already evident when he is but a young boy.

Luke 2:49

He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

We do not need a 'two-nature' argument when considering the incarnation. The two-nature argument seems to come out of the need to understand how Jesus could live a life free of sin. Intrinsic to the formation of our being is the image and likeness of God. This alone makes the concept of total depravity false. Our condition is one of learning to believe from the state of reality we live in, where death prevails. It is the creature's failed struggle with the freedom of choice and the challenge of faith that presents our current condition.

However, Paul acknowledges that the moral conscience is a sufficient guide for human beings to please God.ⁱⁱⁱ Within each of us is the seed of divinity (image and likeness). It is our freedom to say 'no' to God that mars our world. Of course, we are developing beings, dependent upon and connected to one another. How could we become children of God without the process of redemption that is essential for our faith development?

Our God is a redeeming God, redemption is at the center of creation. It is the testament of God's love, a love that reaches beyond the pale of evil, that we see in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

To say that Jesus was human without exception does not exclude the divinity from whence he came, it merely affirms the desire of God to enter the great adventure of creation and join the creation. The uniqueness of Jesus as the 'only begotten' of John 3:16 does not annul the absoluteness of the incarnation. Rather, it was the omnipotence of God that bound the word, the wisdom, the son of God so completely that the incarnation could not be undone. For this reason,

Jesus' existence is a permanent change in the being of God; Jesus' humanity incorporated into the being of God. Psalm 110:4 affirms the permanence of the incarnation into the ages.

4 The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,

“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

It can no longer be said that God is not a human being (for a while he was mortal). That the Lord of heaven and earth is a human being, is one of us, is at the essence of the gospel (good news).

Num. 23:19 a,b

God is not a human being, that he should lie,

or a mortal, that he should change his mind.

Ascending

The hymn moves quickly from Jesus death by crucifixion to establishing Jesus' role in relation to all of humanity and creation. Jesus is Lord and all who are capable of speech (including persons with impediments to speech who will be healed) whether in the heavens or on the earth or below the earth will recognize the divine Christ to be Yahweh incarnate.^{iv} Jesus ascension has returned his place of equality with God (Psalm 110:1).^v The glory of God that is to fill the earth is resident in the person of Jesus.^{vi} Further, humanity redeemed is the glory of God.

How God wins is revealed in this flowing song of celebration. God wins through the patient love of giving all in a moment that defies understanding – God died. There is no terror in God, no satisfaction achieved through coercion or forced subservience. God wins through boundless love that provides forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation. God will not rest until God's love wins. What is God like? God is like Jesus. Jesus is who God is.

How God Wins

Every knee shall bow

But not by force

Every tongue confess

Out of awe and wonder

That Jesus Christ is Lord

God with us revealing God

To the glory of God our Father

Humanity - one in Christ

ⁱ *Monogenes* is the Greek word translated as ‘only begotten’ or ‘only’ in relation to Jesus; John 1:14, John 1:18, John 3:16, John 3:18, 1st John 4:9.

ⁱⁱ Humanity’s propensity for sin is portrayed as ‘surprising’ to God. See: Jeremiah 3:7,19.

ⁱⁱⁱ When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them (Romans 2:14,15).

^{iv} A viable translation consistent with the theology of the Philippian hymn is to read vs. 10a ‘*so that at the name of Jesus...*’ as ‘at the name belonging to Jesus’, meaning the tetragrammaton (Yhwh) as the name.

^v Psalm 110:1 depicts God as seated on a throne (like an ancient near eastern monarch) at the right side the Lord is seated. This metaphorical picture represents the equality of Jesus in relation to God.

^{vi} This wonderful ellipsis is reflective of God’s determination to transform the creation through the redemption and reconciliation of humanity to God’s self. Num. 14:21 nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD—