"HE EMPTIED HIMSELF"

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This brief study examines some of the difficulties in interpreting Philippians 2:5-11 and attempts to clarify Paul's meaning in this passage. With Ladd[1] we can summarize the main statements of the passage as follows: Christ pre-existed in the *morphē* of God. He did not consider equality with God a *harpagmon.* He emptied himself, taking the *morphē* of a slave, and was born in the likeness of man. In the *schēma* of men he humbled himself in obedience to death on the cross. Therefore God has exalted him by elevating him to the status of Lord over all creation.

For the purpose of this study, the discussion will be limited to the following three questions: (1) What is the *morphē theou?* (2) How is *harpagmon* to be interpreted? (3) Of what did Christ empty himself? Each question will first be examined independently of the other two. This will lead to some tentative conclusions, each of which has definite limitations when considered independently. It will be shown, however, that when the conclusions are combined and interrelated they support and strengthen each other.

The usual translation of *morphē* is "form." This immediately causes problems because in our language "form" connotes "shape." Such translational difficulties result in the question of whether *morphē theou* is the divine existence—i. e., God's glory. Is *morphē theou* to be identified with equality with God?

The best approach is to begin with an examination of the words *morphē* and *schēma.* Trench has done an admirable job of this, and much of what follows is based on his work.[2] It is important to note that both *morphē* and *schēma* are used in the objective sense. By this it is meant that the *morphē* and *schēma* of an object would exist even if it alone were the only object in the universe, whether or not there was anyone there to observe it. If a subjective meaning were intended here the word *idea* (or *eidos)* would have been used. *Eidos* includes the idea of what may be perceived and known by others, but *morphē* indicates what is objectively there.[3] Thus we are clearly dealing here with the objective reality of God. On the other hand, because *morphē* is not equivalent to *ousia* or *physis,* this passage does not support an explicit proof of the deity of Jesus. It can be said, however, that no one could be described as being *en morphē theou* who was not indeed God himself. Thus the passage does provide an implicit proof that Christ pre-existed in objective equality with God. This

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[1]G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 419.
[2]R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 261 ff.
[3]J. Behm, *TDNT* IV, p. 743.

equality implies also that his mode of existence was that of being in the glory of God. It remains now to compare *morphē* and *schēma.*

As Behm points out,

> *morphē* differs from *schēma* inasmuch as it indicates the individual appearance as it is, while *schēma* refers to its outward representation. *Morphē* is the whole (of the body, etc.) in and for itself, while *schēma* is what belongs or has reference to the whole (form, outward characteristics, manner of appearance, etc.). On the other hand *schēma* always denotes the outward form or structure perceptible to the senses and never the inward principle of order accessible only to thought.[4]

This can be seen from the passage under study. Jesus from all eternity had been *en morphē theou,* and his manner of existence became that of a *doulos.* He was then found by his fellow men to be in outward appearance *(schēma)* a man.

Trench uses a helpful analogy to describe what happened in the kenosis.[5] He points out that the *schēma basilikōn* is the whole outward array and adornment of a monarch—diadem, tiara, scepter, robe—all of which he might lay aside and yet remain king. This is what Jesus did when he took on himself the form of a servant.

Further support comes from a consideration of the word *harpagmon,* which can be translated with either an active or passive meaning. With the active sense it means "the act of seizing or robbery," while in the passive sense it means a "thing held as a prize." There are many convincing arguments[6] for the unlikelihood of the active meaning being intended here. Arndt and Gingrich conclude that "the state of being equal with God cannot be equated with the act of robbery."[7] If the word is taken to have its passive meaning, two possibilities remain: (1) Christ existed in the form and glory of God but did not consider this equality with God something to be forcibly retained; or (2) Christ existed in the form and glory of God but did not possess equality with God, yet he did not consider this equality a thing to be forcibly seized. Exegetically, there is no objective basis for deciding between these two possibilities. However, the earlier implicit argument for Christ's pre-existent equality with God lends strong support to the first meaning. That this was Paul's meaning can also be supported explicitly by his statement in Colossians 1:19: "For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

Remaining to be addressed is the question: Of what did Christ empty himself? As Ladd points out, the text does not actually say that Christ emptied himself of anything.[8] The self-emptying is qualified by the participle: *morphēn doulou labōn* ("by taking the form of a servant"). Thus the text states that he emptied himself by taking something else to

[4]*Ibid.,* p. 744.
[5]R. C. Trench, *op. cit.,* p. 265.
[6]W. Foerster, *TDNT* I, p. 473.
[7]W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), *in loc.*
[8]G. E. Ladd, *op. cit.,* p. 420.

himself—namely, the nature or form of a servant or slave. In no way do the Scriptures suggest that he emptied himself of his deity. What took place was a change of the outward expression of his deity. Where his deity had previously been expressed outwardly by his being *en morphē theou,* he now took on himself *morphē doulou.* While glorification is the usual way that deity desires to express itself, this passage tells us that deity chose to set its own desires aside. Thus, in the "kenosis" the Lord emptied himself of self. This conclusion agrees well with the context of the entire passage. Paul is teaching humility and self-abnegation for the benefit of others (Phil. 2:1-4) and holds Christ up as the perfect example of this attitude.

In summary we have reached three conclusions arrived at somewhat independently but closely interrelated and strengthening each other. (1) We have shown that *morphē theou* is indeed the divine essence—deity—and that it implies the divine mode of existence—God's glory. Thus Jesus' being *en morphē theou* is an implicit statement of his equality with God. (2) *Harpagmon* is best interpreted to mean that Jesus did not consider this state of equality something to be forcibly retained. (3) He emptied himself of self by allowing the outward expression of his deity to become that of a servant rather than that of glorified deity.

This then is to be our example. We who are *en Christō Iēsou* have a share in his glory and one day will inherit that glory in its fulness. Until then we are called to "have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus ..."