

Philippians 2:5–11, The Kenosis

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I. Background

“Kenotic theology is a theology that focuses on the person of Christ in terms of some form of self-limitation by the pre-existent Son in his becoming man.” *EDT*, 600

A. Beginnings of kenotic theology

Germany: 1860–80; England: 1890–1910

Gottfried Thomasius (1802–75), German Lutheran

The major concerns of these theologians was three-fold.

1. How to explain the full humanity of Christ. (The Gospel record portrays a real man with human limitations—growth, hunger, thirst, learning.)
2. How to explain that God truly was in Christ and maintain *one person* (e.g., man learns; God = omniscient)
3. How could Jesus be God & man without postulating two centers of consciousness (& thus not really like us)?

On this point Thomasius says, First, that if the Eternal Son, after the assumption of humanity, retained his divine perfections and prerogatives, He did not become man, nor did He unite Himself with humanity. He hovered over it; and included it as a larger circle does a smaller. But there was no real contact or communication. Secondly, if at the moment of the incarnation the divine nature in the fullness of its being and perfection was communicated to the humanity, then Christ could not have had a human existence. The historical life is gone; and all bond of relationship and sympathy with us is destroyed. Thirdly, the only way in which the great end in view could be answered was that God Himself by a process of depotentiation, or self-limitation, should become man; that He should take upon Himself a form of existence subject to the limitations of time and space, and pass through the ordinary and regular process of human development, and take part in all the sinless experiences of a human life and death. (Hodge, *ST*, 2:434)

“All forms of classical orthodoxy either explicitly reject or reject in principle Kenotic Theology. This is because God must be affirmed to be changeless; any concept of the incarnation that would imply change would mean that God would cease to be God.” (*EDT*, 601)

B. Various explanations

1. Less conservative views

1. Christ had a human soul, to which the Logos imparted his divinity, little-by-little until he became completely divine. (= gradual incarnation, Dorner, who was an *opponent* of the Kenotic theologians)
2. Laid aside his deity which was then restored at the ascension (Gess and Beecher, cf. summary in Hodge, *ST*, 2:435 f). Takes μορφή as = divine nature &/or essence. This is also referred to as “incarnation by divine suicide.”
3. “Abandoned certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume the human,” e.g., omniscience; μορφή is defined as God’s “permanent characteristics” (Gore, *The Incarnation of Son/God*, 170f). Others explain that he surrendered the external, physical attributes of omniscience, though retaining the attributes of love and truth (A. M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ...*, 475–78). This was also held by Thomasius (Hodge, *ST*, 2:434), Delitzsch, and H. Crosby.
4. He lived a double life from two, non-communicating life centers. As God, he continued his trinitarian and providential existence, and as man he was united with a human nature. He did not know consciously anything of his divine, trinitarian existence (Martensen; cf. Berkhouwer [?], 328).
5. He disguised his deity and attributes, not by giving them up, but by limiting them to a time-form appropriate to a human mode of existence (eternal form > temporal form). His attributes could only be expressed in relation to the (human) time and space that his human form could experience (Ebrard; cf. A. B. Bruce, *Humiliation of Christ*, 152ff).

2. More conservative views

- a. “Old Orthodoxy” (Strong’s desig., *ST*, 704)

He gave up the *use* of the attributes (cf. Carson, *FD&FPJ*, 35).

- b. He *acted* as if he did not possess divine attributes (Anselm).

- c. He gave up the independent exercise of the divine attributes (Strong, *ST*, 703).

- He did *not* give up the attributes nor their use.
- He only exercised the divine attributes as directed by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of his Messianic/Redemptive mission.

μορφή = “that independent exercise of powers and prerogatives of Deity which constitutes his ‘equality with God’” (Strong, *ST*, 706).

- d. He limited himself to the voluntary non-use of the attributes (Walvoord, *JCL*, 143–44, although he also uses the phrase “independent exercise of attributes” in his summary!).
- e. D. A. Carson (*FD&FPJ*, 37) modifies: “abandoned some substantial measure of independence in the use of his divine prerogatives”

II. Grammar and syntax of Philippians 2:5–11

Ἐτοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὅς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ, ἄλλα ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὐρέθεις ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἔταπεινώσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ. Ἐδιόκαυσε καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντων ὀνομάτων, ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πάντων γόνυ κάμψῃ ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων ἵνα καὶ πάντα γλώσσια ἐξομολογήσῃται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.

III. Key Christological questions

- When and how did Christ exist in “the μορφή” of God?
- Was Christ “equal” with God; did he *not* desire to be “equal with God”; did Christ remain “equal with God” or forfeit his equality with God?
- Of what, if anything, did Christ “empty himself” (κενόω)?
- How did the human ὁμοίωμα/σχῆμα/μορφή affect Christ’s person/nature?
- Does Christ still possess a human μορφή/ὁμοίωμα/σχῆμα?

IV. Key meaning of key words

A. The meaning of μορφή (“form”)

1. Meaning based on classical Greek philosophy: “attributes”

Lightfoot is a classic example of those who base the meaning of μορφή on Greek philosophy. He explains that it refers to “the specific character” (129); that “μορφή must apply to the attributes of the Godhead” (132). “In Gk philosophical literature, μορφή acquires a fixed and central place in the thought of Aristotle. For him the term becomes equal to a thing’s essence (οὐσία) or nature (φύσις).”¹

¹Feinberg, “Kenosis,” 29. Abott-Smith’s *Lexicon* also appeals to this background: “in philos. lang. the specific character or essential *form* (Arist....)” (s.v. μορφή). Cf. *TDNT* 4:744.

For years I tried ... to maintain the view of Lightfoot that Paul here uses μορφή with the sense it had acquired in Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelian, and which Murray speaks of as “existence form ... the sum of those characterizing qualities that make a thing the precise thing that it is.” Lightfoot wrote: “though μορφή is not the same as φύσις or οὐσία, yet the possession of the μορφή involves participation in the οὐσία also for μορφή implies not the external accidents but the essential attributes.” But I have had to conclude that there is really very little evidence to support the conclusion that Paul uses μορφή in such a philosophical sense here and that my determination to hold on to that interpretation was really rooted in its attractiveness theologically.²

2. Meaning based on the LXX: “visible form”

A much more likely context in which to understand μορφή is biblical Greek. Phil. 2:6, 7 are the only two occurrences of μορφή in the NT,³ so there is no NT context that will help. Instead the LXX text must be used. There are four uses there: Judg. 8:18; Job 4:16; Isa. 44:13; Dan. 3:19.⁴ Although this does not represent a large number of uses,⁵ it does provide a consistent picture of the use of μορφή. In each instance the word refers to the *visible form* of the individual so described, not to his essential attributes. “Meager though the biblical evidence is, it is sufficient to make a *prima facie* case for the reference to a visible manifestation.”⁶

B. The meaning of ἴσος (“equal”)

The best parallel with the use of ἴσος in reference to Jesus is John 5:17–18.⁷

²Strimple, “Phil. 2,” 259. Feinberg, likewise, notes that “Frankly, the attractiveness of the Gk philosophical interpretation of μορφή is that it gives the theologian about as strong an affirmation of the deity of Christ as is possible.... One must, however, be careful that he does not read his theological convictions into the text when they are not there” (“Kenosis,” 29–30).

³There is one other use in the ending of Mark that, while noncanonical, does illustrate the meaning of the word (16:12).

⁴Judg. 8:18, “each one with the *bearing* of a prince”; Job 4:16, “a *form* stood before my eyes”; Isa. 44:13, “he shapes it in the *form* of a man”; Dan. 3:19, “his *attitude* [formally: *the form* of his face] toward them changed.” (There is a *v.l.* in the last ref.; Rahlfs’ ed. reads μορφη.) Aquilla’s translation also uses μορφή in Isa. 52:14; 53:2.

⁵Both Strimple (260) and Feinberg (29) note this potential problem. Feinberg also notes that in each of the four passages μορφή translates a different Hebrew word (תִּצְלַח, תִּבְנֶה, תִּבְנֶה, תִּבְנֶה). This is not a problem so long as there is a common semantic field.

⁶Strimple, “Phil. 2,” 260.

⁷See *TDNT* 3:352–54 for a good discussion of this. All the quotations above come from this source.

ὁ δὲ [Ἰησοῦς] ἀπεκρίνατο αὐτοῖς, Ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται, καὶ γὰρ ἐργάζομαι. ¹⁸διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ μᾶλλον ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἀποκτεῖναι, ὅτι οὐ μόνον ἔλυνεν τὸ σάββατον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πατέρα ἴδιον ἔλεγεν τὸν θεὸν ἴσον ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν τῷ θεῷ.

Augustine comments to the effect that the Jews understand what the Arians [and their descendants the J.W.s!] cannot seem to grasp: that Jesus claimed to be truly God. “In 5:18 ἴσος expresses ... the equality of dignity, will and nature which the later term ὁμοούσιος was designed to defend... it denotes an equality which is both essential and perfect.” (*TDNT* 3:353). “At Phil. 2:6 the ἴσα has all the significance of the concept of equality in Jn. 5:18” (*Ibid.*). The theological questions raised by Phil. 2 “can be answered only in light of the ἴσα εἶναι θεῷ. Christ was and is equal to God by nature. This equality is a possession which He can neither renounce nor lose” (*Ibid.*).

C. The meaning of ἀρπαγμός

This ambiguous phrase “has created a literature far more extensive than it probably deserves”!⁸ The word group of which ἀρπαγμός is a part seems to convey ideas that are totally out of character with the context of Phil. 2: robbery, plunder, greediness, swindler, rape, booty, stolen, to seize hastily, to be a thief, etc. It is the attempt to make these meanings suitable in a Christological reference that has engendered much of the confusion over the text.

Two primary explanations have been offered for this word.⁹ 1) *Res rapta*, equality with God was his by right and by nature and was not a theft, i.e., he did not steal his position unjustly. This takes ἀρπαγμός in an active sense to mean “robbery, snatching.” 2) *Res rapienda*, equality with God was not viewed by Christ as something to be seized; i.e., he was *not* equal with God and did not make any “snatching effort” to achieve that position. (Cf. NEB, “he did not think to snatch at equality with God.”) This is a passive sense, “something to be seized.”¹⁰

Despite the popularity of these explanations, there is a third option that makes much better sense of the passage and also recognizes that there is an idiom involved. This position is that οὐκ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγάσαστο is part of a stereotyped, idiomatic expression in Koine Greek. It has been explained most fully in Hoover’s 1968 dissertation at Harvard and is summarized in *HTR* (see bibliog.). The essence of the idiom is as follows.

⁸Silva, *Phil.*, 116.

⁹The phrases that follow are the traditional names given to each position. They come from the Latin word *rapere*, “to seize.”

¹⁰There is an alternative, orthodox interpretation sometimes used to explain ἀρπαγμός in a passive sense: “he did not regard his equality with God as a prized possession.” This comes closer to the truth.

1. When ἀρπαγμός occurs as a predicate accusative with any of the following verbs, it is an idiomatic expression: νομίζω, ἠγέομαι, ποιέω, and τίθημι. (Here the relevant phrase is ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο.)
2. When ἀρπαγμός occurs in this combination as an idiom it does not have the same sense as the ἀρπαγμός word group has in other contexts; i.e., there is no connotation of theft or violence.
3. ἀρπαγμός and ἄρπαγμα are interchangeable forms in this idiom. The –μος ending is a rare form (not used in LXX and only here in NT); –μα is the more common form (though only used 17 × in LXX). As a result, the background for the idiomatic use must come from extra-biblical Hellenistic Greek.

These three factors result in the following idiomatic translation of Phil. 2:6, “he did not regard being equal with God as something to use for his own advantage.”

D. The meaning of κενόω

There are two semantic categories for the κενόω word group (other words in this group include κενος, κενῶς, κένωμα, ἀπόκενος, and ἐκκενόω). The listings below phrase the two categories in terms of how the verb κενόω would be translated in Phil. 2.

1. “to empty”

Jer. 14:2, the cities of Judah are *emptied* (κενόω; NIV, “languish”)

Jer. 15:9, a mother of a large family loses all her children in war (κενόω; she is *emptied*; NIV, “will grow faint”)

Gen. 24:20, Rebecca *empties* her jar of water (ἐκκενόω)

2 Chron. 24:11, a money chest is *emptied* (ἐκκενόω)

P Oxy VIII.1082 Fr. Iii.5^{ff} (ii AD), a god empties “of his swinish wealth the dirty usurer” [κενόω; see text and transl. in MM, 340]

BGU I.27⁷ (ii/iii AD) corn is “unloaded” [κενόω; Ibid.]

Phil. 2:7 (RV, ASV, NASB), “emptied himself”

If this is what it means in Phil. 2:6, the question that must be asked is, of what did Jesus empty himself? This question is answered by the various kenotic theologians as consisting of: his deity, his attributes, the μορφῆ θεοῦ, his being ἴσα θεῷ, or (by more conservative theologians) the *use* of his attributes (“voluntary exercise of...” or some variation thereof). But all of these pose major theological problems that seriously affect the *person* of Christ. (The last option listed has frequently been qualified in fundamental and evangelical circles in an attempt to avoid this problem.)

2. “He made himself nothing”¹¹

¹¹BAGD subdivides this category into two: *destroy; render void, of no effect* (1 Cor. 9:15; pass. Rom. 4:14; 1 Cor. 1:17) and *deprive of its justification; pass. lose its justification* (2 Cor. 9:3). These meanings

- 1 Cor. 9:15, “my boasting no one will make nothing/void”
 Rom. 4:14, “faith has been made nothing” (NIV: “has no value”)—and we never ask, “Of what was faith emptied?”
 1 Cor. 1:17, “lest the cross of Christ should be made nothing” (note that the NIV creates an unnecessary dilemma here by translating κενόω as “empty”—which they solve by supplying an object not in the text: “of its power.”)
 2 Cor. 9:3, “lest our boasting about you should be nothing” (NIV’s idiomatic translation here is good: “prove hollow.”)
 Phil. 2:7 (KJV), “made himself of no reputation”; (NIV), “made himself nothing”

The choice between these two options seems fairly obvious. All the other instances of κενόω are from Paul, which would seem nearly conclusive; i.e., translate it here in the same way that Paul uses it elsewhere. (The list above includes every use in the NT.)

V. Conclusion

Jesus did not empty himself of anything. During the incarnation he still possessed the μορφή θεοῦ and he was still ἴσα θεῶ. *The text says absolutely nothing about his attributes.* How did he make himself nothing? Note the following participles (that are probably used instrumentally): μορφήν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος, “by taking the form of a servant [and] by becoming in the likeness of humanity.” In that condition he did not manifest the μορφή θεοῦ outwardly. That he still possessed it, however, may be seen in the transfiguration. The μορφήν δούλου served as a temporary veil cloaking the μορφή θεοῦ.

are metaphorical uses of the unmarked, nonmetaphorical meaning *to empty*. Hermas uses the κενος word group extensively: “For being empty (κ.) himself he giveth empty (κ.) answers to empty (κ.) enquirers; for whatever enquiry may be made of him, he answereth according to the emptiness (κένωμα) of the man” (Hm 11.3). “ In the next place, it [an earthly spirit; i.e., a false prophet] never approacheth an assembly of righteous men; but avoideth them, and cleaveth to the doubtful-minded and empty (κ.), and prophesieth to them in corners, and deceiveth them, speaking all things in emptiness (κενωῶς) to gratify their desires; for they too are empty (κ.) whom it answereth. For the empty (κ.) vessel placed together with the empty (κ.) is not broken, but they agree one with the other. But when he comes into an assembly full of righteous men who have a Spirit of deity, and intercession is made from them, that man is emptied (κενώω), and the earthly spirit fleeth from him in fear, and that man is struck dumb and is altogether broken in pieces, being unable to utter a word” (Hm 11.13–14). The last occurrence (the verb form) could be translated using BAGD’s last gloss: “loses his justification”; i.e., his supposed prophecy is shown to lack credibility in the face of genuine prophecy. This is a metaphorical use since there was nothing in him (even something metaphysical such as a thought or prophecy) that is “emptied.” His pretensions are simply shown to be nothing: incredible, worthless words. (Translations of Hermas, *Mandates from the 1891 Lightfoot/Harmer edition* [1984 Baker reprint; there is a newer, 2d ed. 1992 Baker reprint with translation revised by M. Holmes] of *The Apostolic Fathers*, 434–36; Greek text, 334–36.)

VI. Select Bibliography

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