

their service to the Lord as well.

Paul speaks to this in Gal 6:2.

Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Messiah. (Gal 6:2)

And what is the "law of Messiah" that we fulfill when we bear each other's burdens?

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (Jn 13:34)

One commentator summarizes our verse in this way:

If one regards the brother very highly, he will wish to look to his interests in order to help him in every possible way. The apostle surely implies that a believer should look to his own interests. But he should obey the command, "You must love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19), a commandment which receives added stress when the neighbor is a brother in Christ (John 13:34; Gal. 6:10). The more one realizes how fervently Christ loved the brother, and went all out to save him, the more he will wish to advance that brother's interests. Thus, too, true unity will be promoted, and before the world the glorious fellowship will begin to stand out in all its beauty, as a mighty testimony.¹

5 – Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua,

Having exhorted the Philippian community to strive for unity by living humbly with each other, "regarding one another as more important than yourselves...", Paul now brings forward the greatest and most important example of humility in serving others, and this, of course, is Yeshua Himself. This section of Philippians (2:5–11) has been called "The Hymn of Christ," for it extols the very essence of Yeshua as the victorious Messiah and Savior of His people. There is no need (as some commentators contend) to question the Pauline authorship of these verses. Carried along by the Ruach HaKodesh, Paul penned this

1 Hendricksen, William. *Philippians in Hendricksen-Kistemaker NT Commentary* (Baker Book, 1962), p. 100.

inspired text and it surely fits perfectly in the flow of the epistle and in the very emphasis of unity through humble service to one another within the body of Messiah.

When Paul writes of “this attitude,” he is referring to the very person of Yeshua as the believer’s example. For having focused on “encouragement in Messiah,” the “consolation of love,” the “fellowship of the Ruach,” and the “affection and compassion” that ought to characterize relationships within the believing community, he now gives us the glorious picture of the greatest example of humility and service to others in the self-sacrifice of Yeshua Himself. For Yeshua is the ultimate example of humble service, for He is infinitely righteous and yet gave Himself for those who were marked by sin and unrighteousness. Surely He is the only One Who is qualified and able to bring sinners into the realm of righteousness so that they may live in this life in union with God Himself and are enabled by God’s grace in Yeshua to spend all eternity in His shalom and majesty. But in order to accomplish their redemption, He had to offer Himself as the One bearing their sin and therefore the divine punishment for their sin. Yeshua, therefore, is the quintessential example of love to those who deserve the righteous wrath of God.

The Greek word translated by the NASB as “attitude,” i.e., “Have this attitude in yourselves,” is the Greek *φρονέω* (*phroneō*), “to think, to give careful consideration to something, to set one’s mind on, be intent on.”¹ Perhaps the modern English “mindset” captures the sense of the Greek a bit better than “attitude.” The term “attitude” tends to denote one’s perspective that changes given the current circumstances, while “mindset” tends to denote an overall, general aspect from which one views and reacts to circumstances encountered in life.

...*in yourselves* – Obviously Paul is addressing his words to the Philippian community as a whole. Thus this phrase should be understood as “among you,” that is, “in your community relationships.”² Everyone who makes up a given local community of believers is to strive to have this as a primary perspective, that is to “regard one another as more important than yourselves,” (v. 3). It is far too easy to “point fingers” and tell others about their short-comings, than to take a genuine inventory of one’s own failures in loving others as the Scriptures teach us to do. Once again, these inspired words of Paul remind us that each

1 BDABG, “*φρονέω*,” p. 1165-66.

2 Fee, Gordon, *Philippians* in *IVP NT Commentary* (InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 92.

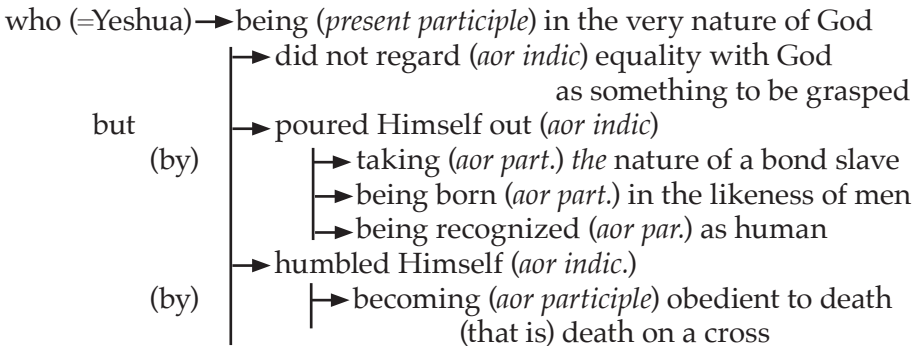
person within the community must make it their top priority to submit to the will of the Ruach and to set themselves to walk in obedience to the clear teaching of the Scriptures, which is “to regard one another as more important than yourself.”

... which was also in Messiah Yeshua, – The very perspective that is to characterize the life of each believer within the community of faith, that is, “to regard one another as more important than yourselves,” is presented to us in the most extreme fashion by Yeshua Himself. For being Himself infinitely holy, yet humbling Himself by taking upon Himself their sin and undergoing the punishment due to them, He stands as the greatest and most perfect example of humility driven by love to enable those for whom He died to gain eternal life, experiencing unending joy and fellowship with Him.

6 – who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

The translation of the Greek in this opening stanza is notoriously difficult. The primary issues relate to the words *μορφῆ* (*morphe*), translated “form” by many English translations; *ἄρπαγμὸς* (*harpagmos*), “something valuable and therefore guarded, held on to, grasped;” and *ἴσα* (*isa*), “equal,” i.e., “equal to God.”

The first thing that we should note is the manner in which the first part of the hymn (vv. 6–8) is grammatically structured. This will aid us greatly in understanding the overall meaning. The grammatical structure revolves around the use of participles and finite verbs and the manner in which they are coordinated. The following outline will be the easiest method for describing this structure:



What we glean from this grammatical structure is significant. The opening present participle (“being”) highlights the fact that His “being in the very nature of God” did not have a beginning. The hymn begins with Yeshua *always being* in the very nature of God. In contrast, the following participles are all aorist, meaning that they had a beginning point. At a point in time, Yeshua “took,” “was born,” was “recognized,” and “became.” Moreover, the aorist participles describe the manner in which the action of the two aorist indicatives (“poured Himself out,” “humbled Himself”) was carried out. He poured Himself out by (1) taking, (2) being born, and (3) being recognized. He humbled Himself by (1) becoming obedient to death. Therefore, the grammatical structure itself helps us understand the manner in which the voluntary humility of the incarnation took place. Likewise, the aorist participles, which speak to a point of time in history (each having a beginning) are contrasted with the present participle that opens the hymn, describing the existence of Yeshua which had no beginning. In our English, to say that Yeshua was “in the form of God” makes it sound as though He was not Himself divine, but simply had the form of divinity. But the word *morphe* does not have this sense. Lightfoot argues that *morphe* is in direct contrast to the word *schema* of the next verse, translated “likeness.” He concluded that while *schema* referred to what is observed and outward, *morphe* denotes that which is intrinsic and essential.¹ Thus, the word

belongs to a group of words which describe God not as He is in Himself but as He is to an observer. To an angel, for example, God has a form, an image, a likeness and a glory. He makes Himself accessible in His form. What the New Testament does is to insist that this form (Phil 2:6), image (Col 1:15) and glory (Jms 2:1) belong to ‘Christ Jesus’ in exactly the same way and to the same degree as they do to God the Father. He is God (Jn 1:1); and He has the image and the glory and the likeness and the form that go along with it. The *morphe* is not the essence, but it presupposes the essence, and ‘truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it.’²

1 Lightfoot, J. B., *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Zondervan, 1953), p. 110.

2 Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1988), p. 213, quoting (in the last line of the quote above), H. A. Kennedy in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 3 (Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), p. 436.

In this regard, the NIV translation has caught the meaning: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.” Thus, when Paul writes that Yeshua was “in *morphe* of God,” He intends us to understand that Yeshua shared in every way all of the divine attributes by which God is known.

He possessed all the majesty of deity, performed all its functions and enjoyed all its prerogatives. He was adored by His Father and worshiped by the angels. He was invulnerable to pain, frustration and embarrassment. He existed in unclouded serenity. His supremacy was total, his satisfaction complete, his blessedness perfect. Such a condition was not something He had secured by effort. It was the way things were, and had always been; and there was no reason why they should change.¹

But of course, things did change. And this is at the very heart of the christological mystery. The second part of this opening stanza (v. 6b) describes why: Messiah did not insist on His rights. This brings us to the word *ἀρπαγμὸς* (*harpagmos*). Yeshua did not consider the glory and majesty of His divine equality with the Father as something to be grasped. This presupposes that Yeshua already had an equality with God. And this is what the text states: “He did not regard His *equality with God* as something to be grasped.” He had every right to be recognized for who He is; and even if willing to come to earth, He could have required that His coming be with the blaze of fire and trumpet blast as at Mt. Sinai or with the momentary glory that shone forth on the Mount of Transfiguration. He could have required that He come with the aid of myriads of angels to attend His every need. These were His rights, but, being in the very nature of God, He did not insist upon these rights.

We often read this opening stanza as setting up a contrast: that *although* Messiah was God He did not insist upon the exercise of His divine rights. But there is another way to read this text: “precisely *because* He was in the very nature of God He recognized equality with God as a matter not of getting but of giving.”² MacLeod has noted the parallel to John 13:3f, where we read:

1 Ibid.

2 C. F. D. Moule, “The Manhood of Jesus in the New Testament” in S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, eds. *Christ, Faith, and History* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 97.

Yeshua, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. (Jn 13:3–4)

Here we have precisely the same motif. Yeshua, fully aware of His divine prerogatives, girds Himself to perform the most servile act, that of washing the feet of His disciples.

The conclusion to which this leads us is that the impulse to serve lies at the very heart of deity. God is not self-centered and self-absorbed. As love, He is pure altruism, looking not on (or at) His own things, but at the things of others. From this point of view the idea of *kenosis* [the Greek word meaning “to empty” in v. 7] is revolutionary for our understanding of God. It is His very form to forgo His rights.¹

7 – but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

Here we encounter the word *κενόω* (*kenoō*) from which the noun *κενός* (*kenos*) is derived, and from which the theological term *kenosis* has sprung. The verb means “to empty, to deprive” and the noun “to be without something, empty.”² Attempting to decipher what Paul meant when he writes that Yeshua “emptied Himself” has captivated scholars since the early centuries and has filled countless pages of commentary and theological writings. It is this phrase that became one of the major dividing points in the early Christological debates and it continues to do so to this day.

But we should be very careful about placing too much emphasis upon a single word (such as *kenoō*, “to empty”) in a poetic or hymnic text. The meaning of our text, while surely contained in the words themselves, is to be found in the whole, not in the parts. Moreover, the precise meaning of *kenoō* is somewhat illusive. Hawthorne translates the phrase “on the contrary, He poured Himself out,” noting that the opening “but” (*ἀλλ’*, *alla*) marks a strong contrastive to the former

1 Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1988), p. 215.

2 BDAG, “κενός,” p. 539.

verse.¹ Yeshua shared equality with God but rather than holding on to His exalted position, He poured Himself out for the sake of sinners. The pronoun “Himself” (ἑαυτὸν, *heauton*) comes before the verb and is therefore emphatic: “but Himself He poured out,” emphasizing the voluntary nature of the act. Yeshua willingly left the glory of His divine position for the humility of the incarnation.

Those who have felt the necessity to ask the question “of what did Yeshua empty Himself” have offered various answers: (1) of His glory, (2) of His independent exercise of authority, (3) of the prerogatives of deity, (4) of the insignia of majesty, (5) of the “relative” attributes of deity—omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and (6) of being equal with God. But the question itself flows from the credal wars of the early centuries and the systematic theologies that ensued. As Hawthorne notes:

The term *kenosis* is a way to account for the human Jesus in the light of His existence in the divine realm and His becoming human. It is concerned with problems that have defied final resolution because the modern interpreter is encumbered with the dogmatic, credal matters of the centuries.²

When we look at the hymn as a whole, the picture is clear even if the details are not. Yeshua, Himself equal with God, left the realm of divine glory and took something to Himself which He formerly did not have: the form of a bond-servant and the likeness of men. The emptying or pouring out does not describe a metamorphosis of being but a radical change of position. Thus the NIV and ESV, which have “made Himself nothing” is not only a paraphrase but a bad one at that. Nor does the phrase bring into view a discarding of divine substances or essences or anything of the sort. Rather, the picture presented here is the same given in 2Cor 8:9.

For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. (2Cor 8:9)

Calvin gives us this conclusion to the question of what is meant by

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- 1 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* in *The Word Bible Commentary*, vol. 43 (Word, 2003), p. 116. See also the data he gives to support the meaning “pour out” for κενόω.
 - 2 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* in *The Word Bible Commentary*, vol. 43 (Word, 2003), p. 117.

Yeshua emptying Himself:

It is also asked, secondly, how He can be said to be emptied, while He, nevertheless, invariably proved Himself, by miracles and excellences, to be the Son of God, and in whom, as John testifies, there was always to be seen a glory worthy of the Son of God? (John 1:14.) I answer, that the abasement of the flesh was, notwithstanding, like a veil, by which His divine majesty was concealed. On this account He did not wish that His transfiguration should be made public until after His resurrection; and when He perceives that the hour of his death is approaching, He then says, Father, glorify thy Son. (John 17:1.) Hence, too, Paul teaches elsewhere, that He was declared to be the Son of God by means of His resurrection. (Romans 1:4.)¹

It is clear that though our faith in God is surely reasonable, for the creation itself gives clear evidence of God's existence (Rom 1:18–20), yet ultimately the infinite greatness of God exceeds mankind's ability to explain by way of human reasoning. It is nonetheless received and fully affirmed by faith, for faith "...is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction (*evidence*) of things not seen." (Heb 11:1).

One commentator gives us these concluding thoughts of our text:

It is impossible to explain such a mystery—that the one who was on par with God could also be a human person to the fullest, a truly genuine human being possessing all the potential for physical, mental, social, and spiritual growth that is proper to humanity (Luke 2:52), and be both at the same time—divine and human, God and a human being. Here, of course, speaks the voice of creedal Christianity with Chalcedonian overtones. Nevertheless, the Philippian hymn seems clearly to set forth just such a paradox and affirm it, but does not try to explain it. Hence, anyone coming to the text in the hope of interpreting it must exercise the same kind of balance and reserve, neither tampering with anything relating to the divinity of Christ, nor calling into question any aspect of the reality of His humanity.²

1 Calvin, *Philippians*, p. 57.

2 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* in *The Word Bible Commentary*, vol. 43 (Word, 2003), p. 121.

taking the form of a bond-servant – “Taking” (λαμβάνω, *labōn*) is the first of three participles that define the “pouring out” or the “emptying of Himself. In “taking,” Yeshua acquired something He previously did not have. He took upon Himself the form of a bond-servant. Once again, the same word for “form” (*morphe*) is used here as in the previous verse, and should be given the same meaning. Even as Yeshua possessed the very nature of God, so in His coming to earth He possessed the very nature of a bond servant. His servanthood was not some “costume” He donned as a disguise. Rather, in the same way that in His preexistence with the Father Yeshua possessed the divine status with all of its prerogatives, so in the incarnation He assumed the status of a bond servant with all of its attended attributes and characteristics. The fact that Greek δούλος (*doulos*), “bond slave,” is often used in the Lxx to translate עֶבֶד (*eved*), “servant,” may suggest that in taking upon Himself the attributes of a bond slave, Paul is making reference to the “Servant of Adonai” in the Servant Songs of Isaiah. If so, then Yeshua’s pouring Himself out may have direct parallel to Is 53:12, where the Lxx uses παραδίδωμι (*paradidomi*, “to give over”), itself a fitting picture of “giving” instead of “grasping” (ἁρπαγμός, *harpagmos*):

Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out (παραδίδωμι, *paradidomi*) Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors. (Is 53:12)

And the concluding description of the Servant’s exaltation in the previous context (Is 52:13) fits well with the conclusion of our hymn in Phil 2:6–11 in which Yeshua is given a name above every name.

Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted. (Is 52:13)

Some have argued that to understand “bond servant” as parallel to the “Servant of Adonai” misses the point of the hymn, which places “bond servant” as a lowly position in contrast to Yeshua’s pre-existence in the realm of divine glory, while the “Servant of Adonai” commands a position of prestige and honor. But the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, while surely accomplishing the will of Adonai, is nonetheless despised and forsaken, and assumes the lowest of roles as the sin bearer of His people. It seems at least possible, then, that the designation “bond servant” in the Paul’s “Hymn of the Messiah” has its roots in the Servant

Songs of Isaiah.

being made in the likeness of men – The Greek verb γίνομαι (*ginomai*) translated here by the NASB as “being made” is an aorist participle and as such, stands in direct contrast to the participle of v. 6, ὑπάρχων (*huarxōn*), “to be, exist,” which is in the present tense. Verse 6 describes the preexistent Messiah as always existing in the very nature of God, while here the aorist participle denotes that He came into existence “in the likeness of men.” The former has no beginning, the latter clearly does. Here then is the second aspect of the “pouring out”—the preexistent Son of God became a man and would forever exist in the likeness of humankind.

The verb *ginomai* commonly means “to be born” so the ESV is good: “being born in the likeness of men.” The plural “men” (ἀνθρώπων, *anthrōpōn*) may answer to the many times that the Lxx uses the Greek plural to translate אָדָם (*adam*) in the sense of “human kind,” especially in the phrase “sons of men” (e.g., Ps 9:20; 11:4; 12:1,8; 14:2; 21:10; 31:19-20; 33:13, etc.).

Much has been made of the term “likeness” (ὁμοίωμα, *homoionoma*). It does not mean that Messiah only appeared to be human (but really was not), or that He just seemed to be human but was of a unique sort. Nor should the word be scrutinized to find some nuance of meaning as to the relationship of Yeshua’s human nature to that of fallen human nature.¹ As noted above, the hymn must be understood in its entirety and not dissected into its constituent parts. The simple and obvious meaning is that Yeshua assumed a genuine human nature like that of other men. The issue of His impeccability (sinlessness) is not the focus of the hymn and the issue should not be forced upon this phrase.

1 Debates in the early centuries of the Christian Church over whether Yeshua sinned were based upon a misunderstanding of Rom 8:3, “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh....” To be “in the likeness of sinful flesh” simply means that He took on the likeness of a normal human being. Nevertheless, He was entirely without sin himself.