

THE MEANING OF ΜΟΡΦΗ IN PHILIPPIANS 2:6–7

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. *The significance of Phil 2:6–7.* Numerous texts of the NT suggest, more or less straightforwardly, that Jesus Christ is very God. In the Gospel of John alone, for instance, one reads: “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1); “so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father” (5:23); “before Abraham was born, I am” (8:58); “I and the Father are one” (10:30); “he who sees me sees the one who sent me” (12:45); “you call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am (13:13); “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9); “all things that the Father has are mine” (16:15); “my Lord and my God” (20:28); etc. In the same Gospel, however, one finds numerous statements by and about Christ that seem to call his deity into question. One reads, for example: “Jesus wept” (11:35); “now my soul has become troubled” (12:27); “he . . . began to wash the disciples’ feet” (13:5); “the Father is greater than I” (14:28); “why do you strike me?” (18:23); “Pilate then took Jesus and scourged him” (19:1); “the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head” (19:2); “they crucified him” (19:18); “I am thirsty” (19:28); “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (19:30); “I ascend to . . . my God and your God” (20:17).

Faced with such a seeming conflict, one could easily conclude that Scripture contradicts itself in its account of the nature(s) of Christ. Augustine, nonetheless, discerns in Scripture a criterion by which one can distinguish the referents of the seemingly conflicting texts about Christ in such a way as to render their consistency transparent. The “rule for resolving these questions throughout all of the holy Scriptures,” writes Augustine (*De Trin.* 1.7.14), “is brought forth to us from one chapter of an epistle of the apostle Paul, where that distinction is most plainly commended: ‘who, when he was in the form of God, judged it no robbery to be equal to God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the similitude of men and found in habit as a man’” (Phil 2:6–7).

In this passage, Augustine finds a “canonical rule” (*De Trin.* 2.1.2) for interpreting texts that ascribe seemingly incompatible properties to Christ.

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English Scripture quotations are taken from the NASB except where otherwise noted. Where no translator is mentioned, translations of other non-English sources are mine.

One must refer any property inapplicable to Christ's deity to his humanity, i.e. "the form of a servant," and any property inapplicable to Christ's humanity to his deity, i.e. "the form of God." By thus discriminating between those texts that describe the "form of God" and those texts that describe the "form of a servant," Augustine harmonizes statements that otherwise might seem irreconcilably opposed. "According to the form of God," the bishop of Hippo writes (*De Trin.* 1.11.22),

all things were made through him [John 1:3]. According to the form of a servant, he was made of a woman, made under the law [Gal 4:4]. According to the form of God, he and the Father are one [John 10:30]; according to the form of a servant, he came not to do his own will, but the will of him who sent him [John 6:38]. According to the form of God, as the Father has life in himself, so has he also given to the Son to have life in himself [John 5:26]; according to the form of a servant, his soul is sorrowful unto death, and: "Father," he says, "if it is possible, let this cup pass" [Matt 26:38–9]. According to the form of God, he is the true God and life eternal [1 John 5:20]; according to the form of a servant, he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross [Phil 2:8].

If one adopts Augustine's interpretation of Phil 2:6–7, then, it seems that one can accept the Bible's testimony to Christ's deity in its full and natural sense without in any way slighting Christ's humanity. To vindicate Augustine's construal of Phil 2:6–7, consequently, is practically to prove that Scripture affirms the deity of Jesus Christ.

2. *The centrality of μορφή.* Given certain, relatively modest presuppositions, moreover, it seems that one can vindicate Augustine's exegesis by establishing that in Phil 2:6–7 "form," or μορφή, means something like "essence," or οὐσία. For if (a) the Bible always speaks consistently and truthfully; (b) God is simple (as theologians of all Christian confessions have traditionally conceded); and (c) Christ is ἐν οὐσίᾳ θεοῦ; then (d) controversial terms such as ἀπραγμός, κενόω, and ὑπερυψώω (Phil 2:9), at least in this context, can assume only a narrow range of meanings. Specifically, interpretations of ἀπραγμός according to which Christ, as man, rejects an opportunity to grasp after deity; understandings of κενόω that entail a kenoticist doctrine of the Incarnation; and construals of ἴσα θεῷ as indicative of anything less than absolute equality with God the Father; all seem *a priori* unacceptable if Christ's ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων implies his ἐν οὐσίᾳ θεοῦ ὄν. In this case, moreover, ὑπερυψώω could bear only an elative, as opposed to a comparative, sense; and the aorist participles λαβών, γενόμενος, and εἰρεθεῖς could not conceivably refer to action prior to the state designated by ὑπάρχων. For the purpose of this investigation, in which we presuppose the doctrines of the verbal inspiration of Scripture and divine simplicity, therefore, proof that μορφή in the context of Phil 2:5–11 constitutes a rough equivalent of οὐσία, if achievable, would suffice to eliminate the difficulties posed by other terms within these verses for Augustine's understanding of Phil 2:6–7 as a "canonical rule" for the interpretation of scriptural language about Christ.

3. *Alternative interpretations.* Alongside the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation, admittedly, at least four alternative construals of μορφή have garnered

appreciable scholarly support, viz. the views (a) that Paul uses μορφή interchangeably with εἰκών; (b) that μορφή in this setting refers to a being's external appearance, or *Erscheinungsform*; (c) that μορφή denotes a force-field (*Kraftfeld*) in Phil 2:6–7; and (d) that μορφή in this context designates a condition, status, bearing, or position. The existence of these widely favored alternatives to the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis constitutes no small difficulty for anyone who attempts to vindicate Augustine's understanding of Phil 2:6–7 by establishing the equivalence of μορφή and οὐσία. Insofar as one can circumscribe a finite set of interpretations that have gained scholarly approval, however, the diversity of perspectives on μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 also empowers one to determine the sense in which Paul employs the term by a simple and direct procedure: process of elimination. Assuming, that is to say, that one of the five, broad positions that scholarship has failed to eliminate as a serious possibility actually constitutes the correct interpretation, one can determine what Paul means by μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 simply by eliminating alternatives until one, hopefully, reaches a construal that faces no unanswerable objections.¹

Before initiating this process, however, we should like to note that the alternative construals of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 under consideration need not be mutually exclusive. Erik Peterson, for instance, contends that μορφή in this passage signifies both an εἰκών and an *Erscheinungsform*.² Jacob Jervell equates μορφή in this context with both an εἰκών and an οὐσία; and Bo Reicke interprets μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 as both an εἰκών and a condition.³ In the following, accordingly, we shall intersperse in our discussions of the four alternative hypotheses clarificatory remarks as to the precise senses in which they do and do not conflict with the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation. After presenting what we consider decisive evidence for the falsehood of those versions of the alternative hypotheses that conflict with the μορφή = οὐσία construal, then, we shall attempt to answer the most substantial objections to the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation, considering this interpretation broadly and not merely insofar as it conflicts with alternative construals.

II. ΜΟΡΦΗ = ΕΙΚΩΝ

1. *Nuance or alternative?* The first view, viz. that Paul employs μορφή in the sense of εἰκών in Phil 2:6–7, might seem more of a complement than a challenge to Augustine's exegesis. As André Feuillet observes:

¹ When we employ phrases such as "what Paul means," we do not intend to prejudge the question, which lies beyond the scope of this article, of whether Phil 2:6–11 contains elements of a pre-Pauline hymn. We employ such language, rather, to indicate that we are concerned with Paul's meaning and not that of a putative, pre-Pauline author.

² Cf. Peterson's "Die Befreiung Adams aus der Ἀνάγκη" in his *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis: Studien und Untersuchungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1959) 121.

³ Cf. Jervell's *Imago Dei: Gen. 1, 26 f. im Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960) 228–30 and Reicke's "Unité chrétienne et diaconie" in *Neotestamentica et Patristica: Eine Freundesgabe, Herrn Prof. Dr. Oscar Cullmann zu seinem 60. Geburtstag überreicht* (ed. W. C. van Unnik; NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962) 208–9.

Whereas in the Synoptics and the Apocalypse, the εἰκών is always an artificial reproduction: the image of Caesar on a piece of money (Mark 12:6; Luke 20:24; Matt 22:20), the image of the beast (Rev 13:13; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2 . . .), etc.; according to St. Paul, . . . the image is something inseparable from the person: for him, to be conformed to “the image” of the Son of God is the same thing as to be conformed “to his glorious body” (Rom 8:29; Phil 3:21). On the other hand, the Apostle does not . . . name the artificial reproduction of human beings or of animals “image” (εἰκών), but the copy of an image: ὁμοίωμα εἰκόνοϛ (Rom 1:23).⁴

One could argue, then, that even if Paul designates Christ “the image of God” in Phil 2:6, as he does twice elsewhere (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), he employs such language precisely to locate Christ within the being of God. To the position that μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 corresponds to εἰκών insofar as this term denotes “the thing itself” or “the genuine article,” therefore, we have few objections; such a position seems functionally equivalent to Augustine’s μορφή = οὐσία interpretation.

Some contemporary advocates of the view that μορφή = εἰκών in the context of Phil 2:6–7, however, view the presumed correspondence of the terms as counterevidence to the claim that Paul ascribes ontological divinity to Christ in Phil 2:6. Some of those who equate μορφή and εἰκών, in fact, believe that Paul, in describing Christ as being ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, means to ascribe to him only the status possessed by the prelapsarian Adam, viz. that of being κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ (Gen 1:27 LXX).⁵ To the extent that the μορφή = εἰκών hypothesis lends support to this “thoroughgoingly anthropological” approach to Phil 2:6–7, therefore, we think it appropriate to treat it as an alternative to the Augustinian interpretation of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7.⁶

2. Arguments in favor. Supporters of the μορφή = εἰκών hypothesis have proposed three principal arguments in its defense. First, these scholars observe that the LXX employs μορφή in Dan 3:19 to translate the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew צלם. Since the LXX translates צלם in Gen 1:26–7 and elsewhere with εἰκών, this argument implies, μορφή must convey much the same meaning as εἰκών.⁷ Second, proponents of this view note, the

⁴ “L’hymne christologique de l’Épître aux Philippiens (II, 6–11),” *RB* 72 (1965) 491. Cf. the similar remarks of Hermann Kleinknecht, “εἰκών C. The Greek Use of εἰκών,” *TDNT* 2.389; and Gerhard Kittel, “εἰκών F. The Metaphorical Use of Image in the NT,” *ibid.* 395.

⁵ Cf., e.g., the interpretations proposed by Hans-Werner Bartsch (*Die konkrete Wahrheit und die Lüge der Spekulation* [Theologie und Wirklichkeit 1; Frankfurt-am-Main and Bern: Peter Lang, 1974] 32–40); James D. G. Dunn (*Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* [2d ed.; London: SCM, 1989] 114–21 and *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 282–88); John MacQuarrie (*Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* [London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press, 1990] 56–59); George Howard (“Phil 2:6–11 and the Human Christ,” *CBQ* 40 [1978] 368–87, esp. 377); and John A. T. Robinson (*The Human Face of God* [London: SCM, 1973] 163–64).

⁶ We borrow the phrase, “thoroughgoingly anthropological,” from Lincoln D. Hurst, who employs it to characterize the position of Dunn (“Christ, Adam, and Preexistence Revisited” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2* [ed. Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998] 85).

⁷ Cf., e.g., Jean Héring, *Le royaume de Dieu et sa venue: Étude sur l’espérance de Jésus et de l’apôtre Paul* (2d ed.; Bibliothèque Théologique; Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1959) 161, n. 2.

Peshitta employs ܠܚܘܡܝܢ, a Syriac word closely related to ܕܡܘܬ, to translate μορφή in Phil 2:6–7. Since ܕܡܘܬ appears in parallelism to ܥܠܡ (= εἰκών) in Gen 1:26, the Peshitta translation suggests that μορφή bears a meaning equivalent to that of εἰκών in Phil 2:6–7.⁸ Third and finally, those who equate μορφή and εἰκών observe that Paul juxtaposes two cognates of μορφή, viz. σύμμορφος and μεταμορφόομαι, with εἰκών in Rom 8:29 and 2 Cor 3:18 in such a way as to suggest that he considers μορφή and εἰκών synonymous.⁹

a. *ܥܠܡ as link between εἰκών and μορφή.* These arguments have persuaded such distinguished students of the NT as Oscar Cullmann, Herman Ridderbos, and James D. G. Dunn to embrace the view that μορφή = εἰκών in the context of Phil 2:6–7.¹⁰ The arguments in question, however, have by no means met with universal approval. Dave Steenburg, for example, subjects the argument from the LXX translation of Aramaic ܥܠܡ by μορφή to the equivalency of μορφή and εἰκών to searching criticism in his “The Case against the Synonymity of *Morphē* and *Eikōn*.”¹¹ In the LXX, Steenburg observes:

only once does *morphē* translate *šlm* and it is not in the sense of either “image” or “likeness.” *Šlm* in all but one of its occurrences either signifies ‘idol’ or is used to speak of man as being “in the image of God.” In almost all of these cases it is translated by *eikōn* (26x), exceptions being the resort to *homoïōma* (twice) and *typos* (once), both words being used in the sense of “idol.” The unique occurrence of *morphē* as a translation of *šlm* is found in Dan 3:19, where its Aramaic counterpart is used in the sense of “appearance.” Theodotion also avoids *eikōn* here by using *opsis* (“face” or “countenance”), a word which, like *morphē*, is nowhere else in the LXX used to translate *šlm*. This suggests rather strongly that *morphē* is used, not because it is synonymous with *eikōn*, but because it covers a rare portion of *šlm*’s semantic field that *eikōn* does not. Therefore, there is no basis for speaking of the interchangeability of the two words in the LXX on the basis of their relationship to *šlm*.¹²

The LXX translation of Aramaic ܥܠܡ by μορφή in Dan 3:19, then, at least when viewed in the light of Steenburg’s discussion, seems not to imply that μορφή denotes εἰκών in the context of Phil 2:6–7.

b. *The evidence of the Peshitta.* The second argument for the μορφή = εἰκών hypothesis, viz. that from the Peshitta’s use of ܠܚܘܡܝܢ to translate μορφή in Phil 2:6–7, possesses two great advantages. First, it seems difficult to dispute that, at least in the context of Gen 1:26, the terms ܥܠܡ (= εἰκών) and ܕܡܘܬ (= ܠܚܘܡܝܢ) bear quite similar meanings.¹³ Second, and even more

⁸ Cf., e.g., Feuillet, *Le Christ sagesse de Dieu d’après les épîtres Pauliniennes* (Ébib; Paris: Gabalda, 1966) 345.

⁹ Cf., e.g., Ralph Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 115–16.

¹⁰ Cf. Cullmann’s *Christology of the New Testament* (trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall; London: SCM, 1959) 176–77; Ridderbos’s *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (trans. John R. de Witt; London: SPCK, 1977) 73–78; and the writings of Dunn mentioned in n. 5.

¹¹ Dave Steenburg, “The Case against the Synonymity of *Morphē* and *Eikōn*,” *JSNT* 34 (1988) 77–86.

¹² *Ibid.* 79.

¹³ Cf. H. D. Preus, “ܕܡܘܬ; ܕܡܘܬ,” *TDOT* 3.259 and F. J. Stendebach, “ܠܚܘܡܝܢ,” *TDOT* 12.394.

importantly, the translators of the Peshitta lend credit to the μορφή = εἰκόν hypothesis not only by translating μορφή with ܠܗܘܘܬܐ in Phil 2:6–7 and Mark 16:12, but also by translating εἰκόν with ܠܗܘܘܬܐ in Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 11:7; 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 1:15; and 3:10.

Two factors, however, tend to countervail this second argument's strengths. First, the Septuagint seems not to warrant the conclusion that דמות is synonymous with εἰκόν. Admittedly, the LXX translates ׀לצ with εἰκόν in Gen 1:26 and thus places εἰκόν in parallelism to דמות.¹⁴ The LXX, likewise, translates דמות with εἰκόν in Gen 5:1. In no other instance, however, does it translate דמות with εἰκόν, and in no case whatsoever does it translate דמות with μορφή.¹⁵ It seems unreasonable, therefore, to treat the tenuous linkage between εἰκόν, ׀לצ, דמות, ܠܗܘܘܬܐ, and μορφή as conclusive evidence for the synonymy of μορφή and εἰκόν.

Second, even if the Peshitta's translators meant tacitly to equate μορφή with εἰκόν by employing ܠܗܘܘܬܐ as a substitute for both, this would not necessarily indicate that, in their opinion, μορφή must in every case signify something less substantial than οὐσία. For the Peshitta translators render εἰκόν in Heb 10:1 as ܠܗܘܘܬܐ, or "substance."¹⁶ Even if the Peshitta's translators equate μορφή completely with εἰκόν, therefore, they do not thereby implicitly exclude the possibility that μορφή, in the context of Phil 2:6–7, might convey the sense of οὐσία.

c. The juxtaposition of μορφή and εἰκόν. The third argument for this theory, viz. that from Paul's juxtaposition of εἰκόν and cognates of μορφή in Rom 8:29 and 2 Cor 3:18, seems similarly inconclusive. In the first passage Paul writes, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (καὶ προόρισεν συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνης τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ), in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren." In the second passage, likewise, Paul writes, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness (τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα) from one degree of glory to another." On the basis of these passages, a supporter of the μορφή = εἰκόν hypothesis could argue:

1. A person can be σύμμορφος to, or μεταμορφοῦται into, only that which is itself a μορφή;
2. Paul states that he and other Christians are, to a certain extent at least, συμμόρφοι to and that they μεταμορφούνται into a particular εἰκόν; therefore
3. That particular εἰκόν is a μορφή.

This argument seems sound, but not quite to the point. The word εἰκόν in these contexts manifestly refers to something substantial, a μορφή to which one can be σύμμορφος or into which one can μεταμορφοῦται; and in this sense,

¹⁴ The LXX renders דמות in Gen 1:26, however, as ὁμοίωμα, not μορφή.

¹⁵ Cf. David H. Wallace, "A Note on μορφή," *TZ* 22 (1966) 21.

¹⁶ Cf. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1993) 490.

the εἰκὼν is, indeed, a μορφή. By describing Christ's μορφή as an εἰκὼν, however, Paul portrays it in the aspect of an exemplar to which the μορφαί of Christians become similar, albeit not identical. Paul conveys a meaning with the term εἰκὼν, that is to say, that he, perhaps, could not convey as clearly with the word μορφή. Although one can accurately describe the referent of εἰκὼν in Rom 8:29 and 2 Cor 3:18 as a μορφή, then, it is not at all obvious that one could substitute μορφή for εἰκὼν in these contexts without at least slightly altering Paul's meaning. This argument establishes, consequently, only that the terms μορφή and εἰκὼν share a common referent in two passages of Scripture, not that they convey the same meaning.

3. *Difficulties.* The three principal arguments employed in defense of the hypothesis that μορφή = εἰκὼν in the context of Phil 2:6–7 thus seem not to demonstrate its probability, at least when it is understood in its “thoroughgoingly anthropological” sense. Three additional considerations should suffice to prove this version of the μορφή = εἰκὼν hypothesis unlikely. First, as Peter T. O'Brien observes, “Adam is nowhere in the LXX or the NT referred to as μορφή θεοῦ” as one would expect him to be if μορφή θεοῦ conveyed the same meaning as εἰκὼν θεοῦ.¹⁷ Phil 2:6–7, in fact, seems entirely bereft of allusions to Adam. As Larry Hurtado explains, “For allusions to work one must use, or at least adapt, at least a word or two from the alluded-to text so that readers can catch the allusion. In Philippians 2:6–8 [however], other than ‘God,’ there is not a single word from the Greek of the Genesis 1:26–7 description of God's creation of the human in ‘the image of God’ or from the Genesis 3 temptation story.”¹⁸

Second, as Teresia Yai-Chow Wong notes, “[I]n the LXX, μορφή is never used in the context of man's creation, nor of his relation to God” as one would expect it to be, again, if it were associated with the biblical idea of the image of God.¹⁹ Third and finally, in the words of Joachim Gnilka, “ὅς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων cannot . . . mean that the pre-existent existed according to the image of God. [For] μορφή is employed again in the same sense in v. 7 and, therefore, can have no other sense than it has in v. 6.”²⁰ Unless Paul equivocates enormously, that is to say, μορφή must bear at least roughly the same meaning in verse 7 as it does in verse 6. Yet Christ certainly takes to himself more than the image of a servant; he becomes a servant, however one wishes to express that more precisely. It seems, consequently, that when Paul depicts

¹⁷ *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 263–64.

¹⁸ *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 102.

¹⁹ Teresia Yai-Chow Wong, “The Problem of Pre-Existence in Philippians 2, 6–11,” *ETL* 62 (1986) 272.

²⁰ Joachim Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* (4th ed.; HTKNT 10/3; Freiburg: Herder, 1987) 139. Cf. the similar remarks of Jean-François Collange (*L'épître de saint Paul aux Philippiens* [CNT 10a; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1973] 88) and Hans-Heinrich Schade (*Apokalyptische Christologie bei Paulus: Studien zum Zusammenhang von Christologie und Eschatologie in den Paulusbriefen* [GTA 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981] 66).

Christ as ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ in Phil 2:6, he must ascribe to Christ some more intimate relationship to God than that of being created, like Adam and Adam's descendants, ἐν εἰκόνι θεοῦ (Gen 9:6 LXX). The Son's real identification with a δοῦλος thus appears to exclude the "thoroughgoingly anthropological" version of the μορφή = εἰκόν hypothesis.

III. ΜΟΡΦΗ = *ERSCHEINUNGSFORM*

The second alternative to Augustine's understanding of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7, viz. the position that μορφή in this context signifies "visible appearance," or *Erscheinungsform*, finds eloquent expression in Johannes Behm's article on μορφή in the *TDNT*.

The phrase μορφῇ θεοῦ, which Paul coins in obvious antithesis to μορφῇ δούλου, can be understood only in the light of the context. The appearance assumed by the incarnate Lord, the image of humiliation and obedient submission, stands in the sharpest conceivable contrast to His former appearance, the image of sovereign divine majesty, whose restoration in a new and even more glorious form is depicted for the exalted κύριος at the conclusion of the hymn, v. 10f. The specific outward sign of the humanity of Jesus is the μορφῇ δούλου, and of his essential divine likeness (τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ . . .) the μορφῇ θεοῦ. The lofty terminology of the hymn can venture to speak of the form or visible appearance of God in this antithesis on the theological basis of the δόξα concept of the Greek Bible, which is also that of Paul, . . . according to which the majesty of God is visibly expressed in the radiance of heavenly light.²¹

As before, one could argue for the functional identity of this construal of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 with the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation. For if the μορφῇ θεοῦ is equivalent to the δόξα κυρίου, and the Lord will give his glory to no other (Isa 42:8; 48:11), then it might appear that Christ's ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων would entail his essential deity.²² It seems, however, that an interpreter of Phil 2:6–7 who identified μορφή in this context as *Erscheinungsform* could reconcile Paul's ascription to Christ of existence ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ with a denial of Christ's ontological divinity in at least two ways. First, such a person could claim that Paul means to identify Christ with the μορφῇ θεοῦ in Behm's sense of the term and thus relegate Christ to the status of a visible manifestation of divine glory, a divine body as it were.²³ Second, an exegete who advocated the μορφῇ = *Erscheinungsform* position could consistently argue that a being of lesser dignity than the Father could exist ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ if by this phrase one means, "in the realm of the effulgence of God's glory."²⁴ To the extent that the μορφῇ = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis lends support to such understandings of Christ's μορφῇ θεοῦ, therefore, it seems

²¹ Johannes Behm, "μορφῇ," *TDNT* 4.751.

²² Calvin employs this argument in his *In Phil.* 2:6. Cf. the similar position of Karl Barth (*Erklärung des Philipperbriefes* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1928] 56).

²³ Cf. the exegesis of Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa ("Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Μετατρον and Christ," *HTR* 76 [1983] 283).

²⁴ Cf. C. A. Wanamaker, "Philippians 2.6–11: Son of God or Adamic Christology," *NTS* 33 (1987) 187–88.

advisable to treat this hypothesis as an alternative to, rather than a variant of, the Augustinian interpretation.

1. *Arguments in favor.* Supporters of the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis appeal to three principal arguments in defense of their position.

a. *The philological argument.* First, these scholars note, the root μορφ- appears to bear this sense in the great majority of the NT, Septuagint, and extrabiblical texts in which it appears. Μορφή itself (Mark 16:12) and μόρφωσις (2 Tim 3:5), for instance, appear in the NT in the sense of “external appearance,” while μεταμορφώω in Matt 17:2 and Mark 9:2 refers to the transfiguration precisely of Christ’s appearance.²⁵ The word μορφή, likewise, seems to bear the meaning, “external appearance,” in six of the seven instances in which the LXX employs it (Judg 8:18; Isa 44:13; Job 4:16; Dan 3:19; Wis 18:1; Tob 1:13; 4 Macc 15:4).²⁶

In the extrabiblical literature of Paul’s era, moreover, authors Jewish and Gentile employ the term μορφή in the sense of “external appearance.” Josephus, for instance, uses μορφή to signify the visible characteristics of the youthful high priest Aristobulus, of Joseph’s brothers, and of the angel who appeared to Gideon in Ophrah (*Ant.* 15.51; 2.102; 5.213). Philo deplores Gaius’s placement of εικόνων καὶ ἀνδριάντων τῆς ἰδίας μορφῆς in the synagogues of Alexandria (*Legat.* 346) and relates how the human body came into existence when the divine artificer took clay and molded a μορφήν ἀνθρωπίνην ἐξ αὐτοῦ (*Opif.* 135; cf. *Migr.* 3). Strabo describes the Germans’ μορφή as similar to the Celts’ in every respect, excepting that the Germans are blonder, taller, and more savage (*Geog.* 7.1.2); and Epictetus likens calling someone with a human μορφή, but without humane principles (δόγματα ἀνθρωπικά) a human being, to calling an apple of wax a bona-fide fruit (*Arr., Epict. diss.* 4.5.19–20). As these examples, which could be multiplied numerous times, attest, μορφή bears the sense of *Erscheinungsform* in many, if not most, of its usages in post-classical Greek.

b. *An exchange of essences?* Second, defenders of the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis argue, μορφή must signify something insubstantial, such as “external appearance,” in Phil 2:6–7, because otherwise Paul’s assertion that the pre-existent Son “emptied himself” (ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσε) would imply that Christ exchanged one nature for another. As C. A. Wanamaker explains, “the verb κενοῦν requires an object to be expressed which is understood,” an object that, presumably, is identical with Christ’s μορφή θεοῦ.²⁷ Any equation of the μορφή θεοῦ with the divine nature thus “poses a difficulty because it forces the conclusion that Christ underwent a change of nature in becoming incarnate,” a transformation that, in Wanamaker’s view, “is difficult if not

²⁵ Behm, *TDNT* 4.750, 755, 758.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 746. The exception is μορφή in Tob 1:13; cf. the discussion of this verse in section V.

²⁷ “Philippians 2:6–11” 185, 187–88.

impossible to conceive.”²⁸ Wanamaker and likeminded exegetes, accordingly, conclude: (a) that the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis leads to absurd conclusions; and (b) that an alternative hypothesis, such as at the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* construal, that in no way implies a change in Christ’s nature(s), must, therefore, constitute the correct interpretation of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7.

c. *The conceptual background.* The μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis derives significant support, third, from OT passages that concern visible manifestations of God. The OT records, for instance, Abraham’s encounters with three figures in human form, two of whom are angels and one of whom seems to represent יהוה, in Genesis 18; Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32; Moses’ vision of God’s back in Exodus 33; Isaiah’s vision of God in the temple in Isaiah 6; Ezekiel’s chariot vision in which he sees “a likeness as it were of a human form” on a similitude of God’s throne and “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezek 1:26, 28); and Daniel’s vision of “the Ancient of Days” and “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7. Similar conceptions, moreover, continue to surface in Jewish texts through the intertestamental period and into the postapostolic era (cf., e.g., Wis 7:26, 29; 1 Enoch 46; 2 Enoch 20:3, 22:1–3; T. Levi 5:1; Apoc. Abr. 18). To proponents of the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis, therefore, a well-attested, ancient tradition of belief in God’s capacity to manifest himself visibly seems to supply a plausible conceptual background for Paul’s employment of μορφή in Phil 2:6 in the sense of “visible appearance.”²⁹

2. *Responses.* This conceptual background, the seeming impossibility of Christ’s emptying himself of the divine nature, and a great mass of linguistic evidence, then, all lend credence to the view that μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 signifies a mere *Erscheinungsform*. The arguments for the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis grounded in these considerations, however, seem less than conclusive.

a. *The philological argument.* Countervailing evidence, for instance, seems largely to blunt the force of the philological argument for the equivalence of μορφή and *Erscheinungsform*. Admittedly, the NT does employ μορφή or its cognates to convey the sense of “external appearance” in four cases. J. B. Lightfoot, in his classic commentary on Philipians, however, maintains that in five instances (Rom 8:29, 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19; Phil 3:10) cognates of μορφή within the Pauline corpus bear an unmistakably substantial sense. The pith of Lightfoot’s argument appears in the following extract in which he contrasts the meanings of μορφή and σχῆμα in the letters of Paul. “A review of the passages where σχῆμα and its derivatives are used,” writes Lightfoot,

will not, I think, leave any doubt on the mind that this word retains the notion of “instability, changeableness,” quite as strongly as in classical Greek. Thus

²⁸ Ibid. 185.

²⁹ Cf., e.g., Markus Bockmuehl, “The Form of God’ (Phil. 2.6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism,” *JTS* 48 (1997) 14–18.

“the fashion of this world,” which “passeth away,” is τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου (1 Cor. vii. 31). . . . The fictitious illusory transformation whereby evil assumes the mask of good—the false apostles appearing as the true, the prince of darkness as an angel of light, the ministers of Satan as ministers of righteousness—is described by the thrice repeated word μετασχηματίζεσθαι (2 Cor. xi. 13, 14, 15). . . . On the other hand the great and entire change of the inner life, otherwise described as being born again, being created anew, is spoken of as a conversion of μορφή always, of σχῆμα never. Thus “he fore-ordained them conformable (συμμόρφους) to the image of his Son” (Rom. viii. 29); “Being made conformable (συμμορφιζόμενος) to his death” (Phil. iii. 10); “We are transformed (μεταμορφούμεθα) into the same image” (2 Cor. iii. 18); “To be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. xii. 2); “Until Christ be formed (μορφωθῆ) in you” (Gal. iv. 19).³⁰

As Wong elaborates, in 2 Cor 3:18 μεταμορφόομαι, as opposed to μετασχηματίζω:

must be understood as implying the essential transformation of Christians into a new life. . . . What matters is not simply an external change which leaves the interior self untouched. The latter is precisely the malfeasance of the false apostles that Paul attacks in 2 Cor 11, 13–15. Christian life should not be like that. Thus, Paul pleads for an authentic transformation of the self in which a completely new life comes about.³¹

That Paul would choose μεταμορφόομαι to convey this meaning would seem quite odd if μορφή, the word from which μεταμορφόομαι derives, could signify nothing other than “external appearance” in this and related contexts. It seems more reasonable to suppose, rather, that the term μορφή can, but need not, bear the sense of a mere *Erscheinungsform* in Paul’s Greek and to determine the word’s meaning in particular settings on the basis of contextual considerations.

The instances in which the LXX employs μορφή in the sense of “external appearance,” likewise, bolster, but do not establish, the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* position. For, although the term μορφή does convey this sense in six of the seven texts in which μορφή appears: (a) the seven instances in which the LXX employs the term hardly exhaust the range of its possible meanings in post-classical Greek; and (b) the LXX, unlike Paul, never applies μορφή or any of its cognates to God.³²

As to extrabiblical usage, moreover, Plato (*Phaed.* 103e; *Resp.* 381c) and Aristotle (*Met.* 11.1060b; *Phys.* 2.1.193b) unquestionably employ the term μορφή to denote a principle of being, invisible and immaterial of itself, that corresponds closely to οὐσία. Authors temporally and culturally closer to Paul follow suit. Plutarch, for instance, repeatedly employs the term μορφή to designate the immaterial aspects of a substance’s οὐσία (*Quaest. plat.* 1003b; *Def. orac.* 429a). Indeed, he follows Aristotle (*Met.* 8.1045a) in declaring

³⁰ *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (10th ed.; London and New York: MacMillan, 1890) 130. Cf. the similar remarks of Paul Henry in his “Kénose,” *DBSup* 5.21–22.

³¹ Wong, “The Problem of Pre-Existence” 271.

³² Cf. Pierre Grelot, “Deux expressions difficiles de Philippiens 2, 6–7,” *Bib* 53 (1972) 503.

μορφή and ὕλη the fundamental constituents of every corporeal substance (*An. Proc.* 1013c). Likewise, Alexander of Aphrodisias adverts continually to Aristotle's conception of μορφή as that which renders potentially existing ὕλη actual and which contains, in a manner of speaking, an individual existent's οὐσία (*In Met.* 215.9, 11, 15; 422.16–17; etc.). Philo, finally, accuses those who dispute the existence of incorporeal, archetypal ideas of stripping the cosmos of εἶδος and reducing it to a morass of ἄμορφος ὕλη (*Spec.* 1.327–28). Usages such as these, admittedly, may be too rare to qualify “immaterial actuality” as a lexical sense of μορφή; they show, however, that persons living before, at the same time as, and after Paul employ μορφή in a sense approximating that of οὐσία. The many instances in which ancient authors employ μορφή in the sense of *Erscheinungsform*, therefore, by no means exclude the possibility that Paul might have conveyed the idea of οὐσία with the term μορφή.

b. *An exchange of essences?* The second argument employed by defenders of the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis, viz. that from the absurdity of Christ's forfeiting one nature and acquiring another in its place, seems no more peremptory than the philological argument just examined. For although the idea that Christ could drain himself of the divine essence in order to assume a human nature does appear absurd, one can postulate that Paul employs μορφή in the sense of οὐσία in Phil 2:6–7 without implying that any such exchange of natures took place.

The perception that advocates of the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis implicitly posit an exchange of natures in Christ seems to derive principally from two false assumptions about the meaning of Phil 2:7: the assumptions (a) that in order to empty himself, Christ must empty himself of something; and (b) that this something must consist in the μορφή θεοῦ. That neither assumption is obviously correct appears from the following three considerations.

First, in every other instance in which Paul employs the verb κενοῦν (Rom 4:14; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor 9:3), he employs it in a metaphorical sense that does not imply that the verb's subject is emptied of any specific element.³³ In Rom 4:14, for instance, Paul writes that “if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void [κεκένωται] and the promise is nullified.” No one asks, as Moisés Silva shrewdly observes, what it is of which faith might be made void.³⁴ In 1 Cor 1:17, likewise, Paul states that “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void [ἵνα μὴ κενωθῆ].” In 1 Cor 9:15b, Paul declares that “it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one [τὸ καύχημά μου οὐδεὶς κενώσει]”; and in 2 Cor 9:3, finally, Paul writes, “I have sent the brethren, in order that our boasting about you may not be made empty [κενωθῆ].” If Paul can employ κενοῦν in this metaphorical sense in each of his other uses of the verb, it

³³ The same holds true for the verb's two appearances in the LXX, Jer 14:2 and 15:9. Cf. O'Brien, *Philippians* 217.

³⁴ Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 119.

seems difficult reasonably to discount the possibility that κενοῦν might bear a kindred metaphorical sense in Phil 2:7.

Second, if Paul places the participial phrases “taking the form of a servant” (μορφὴν δούλου λαβών), “being made in the likeness of men” (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος), and “being found in appearance as a man” (σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος) in apposition to the phrase ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν, he almost certainly employs κενοῦν in such a non-literal sense. For, in this case, the participial phrases that immediately succeed ἐκένωσεν would inform readers that the self-emptying Paul ascribes to Christ consists in his “taking the form of a servant,” “being made in the likeness of men,” and “being found in appearance as a man”: his assumption of a human nature, that is to say, not a surrender of the divine essence. If the aorist participles λαβών, γενόμενος, and εὑρεθεὶς refer to action simultaneous with, rather than antecedent to, the action described by the verb ἐκένωσεν, moreover, it seems difficult reasonably to deny that Paul does, in fact, place them in apposition to the phrase ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν.

Now it seems apparent that Paul intends for verse 8 closely to parallel verse 7. For he not only juxtaposes the sentence ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος, καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος in verse 7 with the sentence ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου in verse 8. He also incorporates both sentences in a single chiasm: ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν . . . ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν.³⁵ It seems, accordingly, that the parallel aorist participles in verses 7 and 8 must bear the same relationship to the main verbs in their respective sentences: that, in other words, either all of the participles in verses 6–7 must indicate action antecedent to that denoted by the main verb, or all must indicate action simultaneous with the same.

The participle γενόμενος in verse 7, however, cannot conceivably denote action prior to that described by the verb ἐταπείνωσεν. For Paul does not depict Christ as humbling himself after his “becoming obedient to the point of death”; he portrays Christ, rather, as humbling himself precisely “by becoming obedient to the point of death.” Since γενόμενος in verse 8 refers to action simultaneous with that described by ἐταπείνωσεν, then, the conclusions of the last paragraph dictate that λαβών, γενόμενος, and εὑρεθεὶς must, likewise, refer to action simultaneous with that denoted by ἐκένωσεν. It seems, therefore, that Paul does place the participial phrases of verse 7 in apposition to the phrase ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν. One can reasonably conclude, accordingly, that Paul employs the verb κενοῦν figuratively to denote not Christ’s forfeiture of some object to be supplied from the context, but the action described by these participial phrases.

Third and finally, even if the verb κενοῦν in Phil 2:7 required an implicit, subordinate object of which Christ might empty himself, this object could not, it seems, be the μορφή θεοῦ. For, as Peter T. O’Brien explains, “On

³⁵ Cf. Roland Bergmeier, “Weihnachten mit und ohne Glanz: Notizen zu Johannesprolog und Philipperhymnus,” *ZNW* 85 (1994) 62.

grammatical grounds, it is impossible for ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ to be the object of ἐκένωσεν; the former is separated by the strong adversative ἀλλά.³⁶ Whatever Christ's kenosis involves, therefore, it does not involve an exchange of the μορφῇ θεοῦ for the μορφῇ δούλου. The absurdity of the view that Christ's divested himself of the divine nature in order to become human does not, accordingly, constitute a genuine difficulty for the μορφῆ = οὐσία interpretation.

c. The conceptual background. The third, principal argument for the μορφῆ = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis, viz. that OT passages concerning visible, divine self-manifestations supply a plausible conceptual background for the employment of μορφῆ in this sense seems, in certain respects, difficult to refute. Both Testaments indisputably contain narratives in which the essentially invisible God (Job 9:11; 23:8–9; Rom 1:20; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; Heb 11:27) discloses himself visibly through some created medium. The idea that God possesses created manifestations of the δόξα κυρίου, accordingly, seems thoroughly biblical.

Paul's belief in divine omnipresence, nevertheless, renders the view that Christ abandoned some visible trappings of the essential divine δόξα and then regained them at a later time highly problematic. For (a) Paul's understanding of Christ's *kenosis* does not, as we have seen, imply that Christ despoiled himself of the divine nature when he became incarnate; and (b) omnipresence is an essential property of the deity (1 Kgs 8:27; 2 Chr 2:6; 6:18; Ps 139:7–10; Jer 23:24; Acts 17:27–8; Eph 1:23). It seems, therefore (c) that Christ *qua* divine must have retained his omnipresence even in his *status exinanitionis*. Now, if this is the case, (d) Christ not only did not, but could not have abandoned visible insignia of divine glory in heaven in order to bear the form of a servant on earth. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there" (Ps 139:8).

One might protest, of course, that this conclusion runs contrary to the natural sense of John 17:5: "Now, Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was." In the view of some exegetes, this text implies that Christ did abandon some heavenly glory in the Incarnation and that he desired for this glory to be restored upon the completion of his earthly mission.³⁷ The glory that the Logos possessed "before the world was," i.e. before the creation, however, cannot have consisted in the sort of created splendor that advocates of the μορφῆ = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis believe Jesus forsook in his kenosis. Christ must refer in John 17:5, rather, to uncreated glory, that is, the essential glory of the deity.

Now the view that Christ forfeited one or more divine attributes, such as divine omnipresence or God's intrinsic glory, in the process of assuming a human nature seems *a priori* unacceptable. Such an abridgment of Christ's

³⁶ O'Brien, *Philippians* 218.

³⁷ Cf., e.g., Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (ed. Robert W. Funk and Ulrich Busse; trans. Robert W. Funk; 2 vols.; Hermeneia 57; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 2.152 and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 557.

deity would ill comport with John's high Christology and with the biblical testimony to God's immutability (Ps 102:25–7; Mal 3:6; Heb 1:10–12; 6:13–18; Jas 1:17). As we have seen, moreover, such an abridgment is not demanded by Phil 2:7. It seems preferable, therefore, to hold with John Chrysostom (*Hom. Joann.* 80.2) that Jesus prayed in his human psychological subjectivity that the Father might reward his human nature with some participation in God's essential glory.

Christ's essential omnipresence *qua* divine, then, seems to preclude the possibility of his relinquishing created manifestations of divine glory, which his Father and the Holy Spirit enjoy without interruption, during his earthly ministry. The μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypothesis as ordinarily understood, consequently, lacks credibility. One could, admittedly, reformulate the hypothesis in such a way as to neutralize this objection; instead of holding that Christ exchanged μορφαί at his conception and his ascension, one could posit that Christ possessed both μορφαί simultaneously during his sojourn on earth. Even in this milder cast, however, the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* position seems liable to just criticism.

For the previously quoted objection of Joachim Gnilka to the view that μορφή = εἰκὼν in Phil 2:6 applies equally to the hypothesis that μορφή = *Erscheinungsform*.³⁸ Unless Paul equivocates tremendously in his use of μορφή in this pericope, the term must bear the same meaning in Phil 2:7 as it does in 2:6. If by μορφή in verse 7, however, Paul means nothing more than *Erscheinungsform*, he asserts that Christ took on the mere appearance of a servant. In this case, it seems, Christ could hardly have become "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The view that μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 signifies nothing more than an *Erscheinungsform*, accordingly, seems objectionably docetic and thus worthy of rejection.

IV. ΜΟΡΦΗ = KRAFTFELD

According to Hermann Binder, a contemporary advocate of the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis, by μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 Paul means:

a realm, a force-field, [or] in any event a spatial magnitude. . . . The concept μορφή of Phil 2 does not mean something peculiar to the person of Christ; the μορφή *contains him*. Within the μορφή θεοῦ, he is grouped together with God. In the μορφή δούλου he is under human beings. The μορφή θεοῦ is the field of movement in which the encounter between God and Christ occurs; the μορφή δούλου is the field of activity of the servant, the worldwide sphere of encounter between the serving Christ and the humanity that he serves.³⁹

This interpretation, whose foremost proponent is Ernst Käsemann, depends heavily on the presupposition that Phil 2:6–11 constitutes, originally, a paean to the primal man of Hellenistic mythology, a pre-Christian liturgical composition that came to be employed in Christian worship and that Paul then adapted to his own purposes in his letter to the Philippians.

³⁸ Cf. *Der Philipperbrief* 138–39.

³⁹ "Erwägungen zu Phil 2:6–7b," *ZNW* 78 (1987) 235–36.

1. *Arguments in favor.* Given this presupposition, supporters of the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis advance three principal arguments in defense of their position: first, that the Jesus of Phil 2:6–11 displays striking similarities to the *Urmensch-Erlöser* of religious Hellenism; second, that μορφή signifies *Kraftfeld* in various Hellenistic mythological texts; and, third, that the placement of ἐν before μορφή in verse 6 makes sense only if μορφή bears a distinctively Gnostic sense in both verses.

In support of the first contention Käsemann argues that the hymn's characterization of Christ as ἴσα θεῶ; its description of Christ as sacrificially assuming the burdens of lower natures; and its equation of human existence with slavery all find precise parallels in Hellenistic religious literature. Käsemann claims, specifically, first that in *Corp. herm.* 1.13, Poimandres is called equal to God and that the text "then, in a quite astounding analogy to our text, . . . says: ἔδειξε . . . τὴν καλὴν θεοῦ μορφήν."⁴⁰ "Both passages," Käsemann continues, "stand so temporally and materially [*sachlich*] near to one another, and still doubtless are independent of each other, that only common tradition can explain this relation."⁴¹ Second, notes Käsemann, in *Corp. herm.* 1.15 Poimandres is portrayed as undergoing a *kenosis* of sorts. "Being immortal and having authority over all things," the anonymous author writes, "he suffers mortal things, being subject to fate. Being, then, above harmony, in harmony he became a servant." Third and finally, Käsemann asserts that Hellenistic sacred texts agree with Phil 2:7, over against the Hebrew Bible and the literature of classical Greece, in depicting "the human being as such as a slave: a slave, viz. to εἰμαρμένη, to matter, to stars and powers."⁴² That Paul himself shares this conception of humanity's status, Käsemann writes, "from Pauline cosmology, anthropology, and demonology should be evident."⁴³

Käsemann's treatment of the second consideration is rather less complex. The term μορφή, he claims, bears the sense of *Kraftfeld* in *Sib. Or.* 2.230 and 8.458 as well as *Corp. herm.* 1.13–15.⁴⁴ As to the third consideration, finally, Käsemann maintains that:

one has a form, a manner, a bearing. One is not exactly, spatially "in it." Yet this local "in" encounters us in Paul as so very technical that its meaning cannot be seriously disputed. It [i.e. μορφή] represents a realm in which one stands and that determines one as a force-field. Hellenism sees existence just so; one is always placed in a force-field and qualified by it.⁴⁵

Käsemann thus asserts that the phrase ἐν μορφήν betrays unambiguously the hymn's Hellenistic provenance and that this background confirms the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis.

⁴⁰ Ernst Käsemann, "Kritische Analyse von Phil. 2, 5–11" in Käsemann's *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960) 69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* 73.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 67, body of text and n. 61; and 69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 68.

2. *Responses.* Käsemann proposes, therefore, three relatively weighty arguments on behalf of his distinctive interpretation of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7. Each of these arguments, nonetheless, displays considerable vulnerability when subjected to scrutiny. The first argument for the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis, that from the similarities between the *Urmensch* of Hellenistic mythology and the Christ of Phil 2:6–11, for instance, has received a particularly thorough rebuttal from Dieter Georgi.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding the genuine similarities between the career of Christ and that of Poimandres and other Hellenistic savior figures, Georgi observes, the typical *Urmensch-Erlöser* myth differs so radically from the plot of the Philippians hymn as to render dependence of the latter on the former highly improbable.⁴⁷

For, first, Georgi explains, “The Gnostic *Erlöser* myth [in stark contrast to the Philippians hymn] knows neither a real humanization nor an ‘Incarnation’ of any sort, but only the assumption of a disguise.”⁴⁸ Second and by the same token, Phil 2:6–11 portrays no “active confrontation of the savior with extradivine powers”: a critical element, in Georgi’s view, of the typical Gnostic savior myth.⁴⁹ In the Philippians hymn, Georgi notes, third, “the faithful do not appear in the text; indeed, the objects of salvation are not expressly mentioned at all.”⁵⁰ “The Gnostic *Erlösermythos*, however,” continues Georgi, “always also speaks of the objects of salvation and depicts the action of the savior quite vividly as soteriological.”⁵¹ Fourth, Georgi adds, in pagan *Erlöser* myths “the ascent of the savior is either his own undertaking or—if it is still necessary for a special work to be done—it is accomplished through the intervention of another savior, who overcomes the mistake of the first savior. Never, however . . . is the action of God as sovereign and miraculous so much spoken of as in Phil 2:9.”⁵² Fifth and finally, Georgi observes, Phil 2:10–11 contains an allusion to Isa 45:23, an allusion that would seem difficult to account for if the hymn constituted a pre-Christian, Gnostic liturgical composition.⁵³ These considerations, it seems, suffice to counterbalance Käsemann’s evidence for the Gnostic derivation of Phil 2:5–11. The μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis, accordingly, insofar as it presupposes this Gnostic derivation, seems correspondingly questionable.

In Käsemann’s second principal argument for the equivalency of μορφή and *Kraftfeld* in Phil 2:6–7, he contends that μορφή in *Sib. Or.* 2.230 and 8.458 as well as in *Corp. herm.* 1.14 bears the sense of *Kraftfeld*. The texts in question, with an English translation supplied beneath, follow:

1. καὶ πάσας μορφὰς πολυπενθέας εἰς κρίσιν ἄξει (*Sib. Or.* 2.230).
And all mournful forms he [Uriel] will lead to judgment.

⁴⁶ “Der vorpaulinische Hymnus Phil 2, 6–11,” in *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. Erich Dinkler; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1964) 263–69.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 264.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 265.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* 265–66.

2. οὐρανόθεν δὲ μολὼν βροτέην ἐνεδύσατο μορφήν (*Sib. Or.* 8.458).
Having come down from heaven, he [Gabriel] put on a mortal form.

3. καὶ ὁ τοῦ τῶν θνητῶν κόσμου καὶ τῶν ἀλόγων ζῴων ἔχων πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν διὰ τῆς ἁρμονίας παρέκυψεν, ἀναρ ῥήξας τὸ κύτος, καὶ ἔδειξε τῇ κατοφερεῖ φύσει τὴν καλὴν τοῦ θεοῦ μορφήν, ὃν ἰδοῦσα ἀκόρεστον κάλλος καὶ πᾶσαν ἐνέργειαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἔχοντα τῶν διοικητῶρων τὴν τε μορφήν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐμειδίασεν ἔρωτι, ὡς ἄτε τῆς καλλίστης τῆς μορφῆς τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου τὸ εἶδος ἐν τῷ ὕδατι ἰδοῦσα καὶ τὸ σκίασμα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. ὁ δὲ ἰδὼν τὴν ὁμοίαν αὐτῷ μορφήν ἐν αὐτῇ οὖσαν ἐν τῷ ὕδατι, ἐφίλησε καὶ ἠβουλήθη αὐτοῦ οἰκεῖν· ἅμα δὲ τῇ βουλῇ ἐγένετο ἐνέργεια καὶ ᾤκησα τὴν ἄλογον μορφήν· ἡ δὲ φύσις λαβοῦσα τὸν ἐρώμενον περὶ ἐπλάκη ὅλη καὶ ἐμίγησαν· ἐρώμενοι γὰρ ἦσαν (*Corp. herm.* 1.14).

And he, having all authority over the world of mortals and of irrational creatures, stooped down to look through the harmony, having broken into the vessel, and displayed to the sunken nature the beautiful form of God, who [nature], having seen inexhaustible beauty and him who had in himself every power of the controllers [archons] and the form of God, she smiled through love; thus, inasmuch as she had seen in the water the likeness of the most beautiful form of the Man and his shadow on the earth. He, seeing in the water the form like himself existing in her, loved her and wished to dwell with her. And at once from the desire came action, and he inhabited the speechless form. And all nature, having received the beloved, twisted herself around him, and they made love; for they were lovers.

Käsemann's interpretation of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 derives no real support, it seems, from *Sib. Or.* 2.230 and 8.458. In the first text, μορφή seems to mean "physical appearance" and to refer by metonymy to the substance of the persons being led by Uriel to judgment. In the second, likewise, the μορφή that Gabriel dons may consist in nothing more than an external appearance and, in any event, seems to signify nothing like a *Kraftfeld* of the sort that Käsemann mentions.

The last of the five usages of μορφή in *Corp. herm.* 1.14, nonetheless, does seem to signify a realm of some sort and so to attest the usage of μορφή in the sense of *Feld*. Even in this last case, however, the text seems not to demand that one conceive of the *Feld* in question as a *Kraftfeld*; and the pericope's author seems to employ μορφή in the sense of external appearance or, perhaps, visible substance in the other four usages of the word. Käsemann's textual evidence, therefore, supplies some, albeit slight, lexical warrant for his μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis.

Käsemann's third argument for this interpretation concerns the significance of the expression ἐν for the meaning of μορφή in Phil 2:6. The claim that one can have an essence, appearance, etc., but cannot precisely be in them, admittedly, constitutes an adroit objection to the μορφή = οὐσία and the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* hypotheses. Philippians 2:7, however, seems to supply the basis for a similar and equally powerful objection to Käsemann's own position: one can enter into, dwell within, or exit a realm, it seems, but one cannot take one. In any event, Paul believes that even unregenerate human beings "live and move and exist" in God (Acts 17:28): that the μορφή θεοῦ, in other words, encompasses the entire universe. If the μορφαί of Phil 2:6–7 were *Kraftfelder*, therefore, the μορφή θεοῦ would cease to differ

radically from the μορφή δούλου; the μορφή θεοῦ, rather, would constitute a whole of which the μορφή δούλου would form a part. Insofar, then, as the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* proposal tends to minimize the distinction between the μορφή δούλου and the μορφή θεοῦ; and insofar as interpreters of all stripes, including Käsemann himself, take the two to be antitheses within the context of Philippians, the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis appears not only unwarranted, but also implausible.⁵⁴

V. ΜΟΡΦΗ = CONDITION

1. *Refinement or alternative?* The fourth and final alternative to the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis, viz. the view that Paul designates a condition, position, bearing, or status with μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 (a position we shall refer to as the μορφή = condition interpretation) might, admittedly, appear to constitute more a refinement of than an alternative to the Augustinian understanding of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7. For, unless one is willing (a) to assign μορφή a different sense in verse 7 than one assigns it in verse 6; or (b) to embrace a docetistic understanding of the Incarnation, according to which Christ possessed the position or status, but not the very nature, of a human being, it seems that one cannot consistently deny that the one who enjoyed the condition or status of God also possessed his nature. “One cannot see,” as Paul Henry observes, “why the divine condition can be disassociated from the divine nature, without the human condition’s [also] being able to be disassociated from the human nature.”⁵⁵

Some, though by no means all, of those who take Paul to mean condition, status, position, bearing by μορφή in Phil 2:6–7, however, are ambivalent at best as to whether one who possesses the divine μορφή must also possess the divine φύσις.⁵⁶ It seems advisable, therefore, to treat the μορφή = condition, etc. hypothesis as an alternative to, rather than a refinement of, the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation.

2. *Arguments in favor.* Those who equate μορφή with condition, position, bearing, or status in Phil 2:6–7 commonly appeal to three principal arguments. First, the construal of μορφή as condition, status, etc. appears to possess genuine, albeit slender, lexical warrant.⁵⁷ The μορφή = condition hypothesis, second, lends coherence to Phil 2:6–7, in the view of certain of its proponents, by disassociating the μορφή θεοῦ from the divine essence and so precluding kenoticist misunderstandings.⁵⁸ Third and finally, advocates

⁵⁴ We derive the argument from Acts 17:28 to the untenability of the μορφή = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis from Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (NAC 32; Nashville: Broadman, 1991) 102, n. 144.

⁵⁵ “Kénose,” *DBSup* 5.155.

⁵⁶ Cf., e.g., Eduard Schweizer, *Lordship and Discipleship* (trans. anon.; SBT 28; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1960) 62.

⁵⁷ Cf., e.g., Martin, *Carmen Christi* xx.

⁵⁸ Cf., e.g., Ulrich B. Müller, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper* (2d ed.; THKNT 11/1; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002) 97.

of the μορφή = condition hypothesis argue, the phrase μορφή δούλου evokes the image of an impoverished social condition in the mind of the reader and so legitimates the rendering of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 by “condition.”⁵⁹

3. *Responses.* In view of our previous discussion of kenoticist construals of Phil 2:7, it seems unnecessary at this juncture to respond at length to the second of these arguments; as we have already shown, the kenosis of Phil 2:7 need not involve Christ in a forfeiture of the μορφή θεοῦ. The first and third arguments, by contrast, raise issues we have not previously considered and so deserve at least a cursory response.

a. *Philological defense.* The first argument, viz. the contention that μορφή at least occasionally appears in the sense of condition outside of Phil 2:6–7, seems difficult to refute. The texts in which μορφή allegedly bears this meaning follow, with an English translation beneath:

1. καὶ ἔδωκέν μοι ὁ ὕψιστος χάριν καὶ μορφήν ἐνώπιον Ενεμεσσαρου, καὶ ἠγόραζον αὐτῷ πάντα τὰ πρὸς τὴν χρῆσιν (Tob 1:13).

The Most High gave me favor and good standing with Shalmaneser, and I used to buy everything he needed (NRSV).

2. τὸ γὰρ ἄγροικον τοῦ πολιτικοῦ σώματος οὐ μορφή, κατασκευῆ δὲ καὶ διαθέσει τινὶ τῆς μορφῆς διήνεγκεν (Dion. Hal., *Din.* 8).

For the rustic differs from the citizen not in appearance of body, but in a certain training and disposition of bearing.

3. λαθοῦσα καὶ κατακρυσσαμένη τὴν τῶν ὄχλων ἄγνοιαν, οὐ μόνον ἐν εὐπορίᾳ καὶ τρυφῇ καὶ μορφῇ πλείονι τῆς ἐτέρας διήγεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τὰς προστασίας τῶν πόλεων, ἃς ἔδει τὴν φιλόσοφον ἔχειν, εἰς ἑαυτὴν ἀνηρτήσατο (Dion. Hal., *Ant. orat.* 1.1).

Having escaped detection by, and deceived, the ignorance of the masses, she [i.e. the more recent, debased class of rhetoricians] lived not only in greater ease and luxury and social status than the others, but also attached to herself the honors and governorships of cities, which the philosopher ought to have had.⁶⁰

As to the first passage: the context indicates that μορφή must signify, in this text at least, something like standing or esteem. Shalmaneser presumably would not have entrusted Tobit with the office of purchasing agent simply because he admired the Israelite’s physique. Since, moreover, (a) beauty constitutes a secondary, but well-attested sense of μορφή; and (b) the concepts of beauty and status overlap significantly, especially when one speaks of status or beauty ἐνώπιον someone else, such as Shalmaneser; μορφή seems (c) to lend itself quite easily to metaphorical use in the sense of status in the

⁵⁹ Cf., e.g., Paul Joüon, “Notes philologiques sur quelques versets de l’épître aux Philippiens,” *RSR* 28 (1938) 226–27.

⁶⁰ Ceslaus Spicq, in his “Note sur μορφή dans les papyrus et quelques inscriptions,” *RB* 80 (1973) 37–45, presents the texts just translated as lexical warrant for the μορφή = condition hypothesis on pp. 38; 41, n. 23; and 42, n. 28.

context of Tob 1:13.⁶¹ It seems unreasonable, therefore, to dispute the exegesis of this text proposed by Joseph Fitzmeyer. “The word μορφή,” he writes, “denotes ‘outward form, appearance,’ and describes the way that Tobit was seen and regarded by others, i.e. the image he projected or his recognized status at court.”⁶² It seems, accordingly, that Tob 1:13 does supply a precedent for the employment of μορφή in the sense of “status” or “esteem.”

The second passage, similarly, appears to attest the usage of μορφή in the related sense of “bearing.” After stating that, according to some, Demosthenes’s immoderate boasting qualifies him as a rustic, Dionysius of Halicarnassus adds, by way of explanation: “For the rustic differs from the citizen not in appearance of body [σώματος οὐ μορφή], but in a certain training and disposition of bearing [κατασκευῆ δὲ καὶ διαθέσει τινὶ τῆς μορφῆς].” Dionysius employs μορφή, then, in the sense of “external appearance” early in this sentence. It is unlikely, therefore, that, only a few syllables further, he would employ the same term in a starkly contrastive, substantial sense. *Erscheinungsform* nonetheless seems an awkward translation for the second μορφή of this sentence; no amount of “disposition and training” can render a congenitally ugly μορφή beautiful. The second μορφή, consequently, must signify something (1) that one can modify through persistent effort; (2) that is neither a substance nor an *Erscheinungsform*; and (3) that nonetheless relates closely to *Erscheinungsform*, the meaning of the sentence’s first μορφή. Now “deportment,” “manner,” and “bearing” meet these rather stringent requirements and, if substituted for μορφή, would not disrupt the sentence’s logical or syntactical flow. It seems difficult, accordingly, reasonably to deny that μορφή at least may mean something like “deportment,” “manner,” or “bearing” in this instance.

In the third and final text, Dionysius relates how a new class of rhetoricians, a class he personifies as a shrew, gained the ascendancy during the Hellenistic period over the practitioners of what Dionysius calls “the ancient and philosophical rhetoric.” The question of whether μορφή signifies “status” in this text hinges on the meaning of the following clause: οὐ μόνον ἐν εὐπορίᾳ καὶ τρυφῇ καὶ μορφῇ πλείονι τῆς ἐτέρας διῆγεν. In our translation, we assume that the phrase, εὐπορία καὶ τρυφή καὶ μορφῆ designates the respects in which the new rhetoricians flourished more than devotees of the ancient art.

Now when Dionysius specifies that the new rhetors μορφῇ πλείονι τῆς ἐτέρας διῆγεν, he surely does not mean that the new rhetors were more handsome than their predecessors; beauty is not a prerogative that one can usurp. Likewise, Dionysius certainly does not ascribe to the rhetorical innovators a nobler nature than traditional rhetors. The term μορφή in this passage, accordingly, can mean neither “nature” nor “beauty” nor “external appearance.” Since Dionysius does lament that the new class of rhetors lived in greater ease

⁶¹ For the use of μορφή in the sense of beauty, cf., e.g., Pseudo-Apollodorus’s report that Hera cast Side into Hades, because Side rivaled her in μορφή (*Bibl.* 1.4.3).

⁶² *Tobit* (Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003) 114.

and luxury than the others (ἐν εὐπορίᾳ καὶ τρυφῇ . . . πλείονι τῆς ἑτέρας διῆγεν) and that they attained honors and the governorships of cities (τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τὰς προστασίας τῶν πόλεων) that rightly belonged to philosophers, however; it would seem quite natural for Dionysius to ascribe to the new rhetors a higher social status than their competitors enjoyed. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assign μορφή the sense of “social status” in this instance.

This evidence that μορφή can bear the sense of “condition,” “status,” “position,” etc. does not, of course, imply that μορφή actually conveys this sense in Phil 2:6–7. It does, however, defuse a common criticism of the μορφή = condition hypothesis: the charge, viz. that “this hypothesis collides with the absence of this sense of μορφή in Greek.”⁶³ Although “condition” hardly constitutes a lexical sense of μορφή, then, it is at least attested.

b. *Social condition.* According to the third and final argument for the μορφή = condition hypothesis, the phrase μορφή δούλου in Phil 2:7 evokes the thought of an abject social condition and so indicates that the two μορφαί of verses 6 and 7 represent radically divergent social conditions. “In the mind of St. Paul,” explains Paul Joüon:

The word μορφή evidently has the same sense in ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ and μορφὴν δούλου (v. 7). It is important, therefore, to render the two instances with the same word and, if one can, with an intelligible word. In μορφὴν δούλου, we discern quite well what it is in reality. Since the entire context speaks of humility (v. 6–8) and then, by contrast, of honors and glory (v. 9–11), it is without doubt the estate of a servant as a social condition that is envisaged. The condition of a servant is essentially humble, and its humility stands out even more when one opposes it to the condition of God, sc. the situation of God from the point of view of dignity. The term “in the condition of God” contains nothing shocking for the reader who understands that it is chosen on the basis of “condition of a servant.”⁶⁴

Much of this reasoning seems unobjectionable. Μορφή must, indeed, bear the same sense in verse 6 as in verse 7, and the phrase μορφή δούλου unquestionably connotes the condition or circumstances in which a δούλος lives. The phrase μορφή δούλου, nonetheless, seems to indicate something more substantial than mere circumstances. For one must actually be a δούλος in order to experience the servile condition in all of its wretchedness. In Phil 2:7, therefore, Paul seems at least implicitly to assert not merely that Christ assumed the condition of a servant, but that he became an actual servant himself; the expression μορφή δούλου, in other words, must connote not merely the condition, but also the being of the servant. Since, as Joüon correctly observes, the parallel instances of μορφή in verses 6 and 7 must bear the same meaning, the ontological associations that attach to the phrase μορφή δούλου must attach equally to μορφή θεοῦ. By his employment of these expressions, then, Paul at least implies that Christ possesses both a divine

⁶³ Collange, *Philippiens* 88.

⁶⁴ “Notes philologiques” 226–27.

and a human nature. Even if Jouon's construal of μορφή were correct, therefore, it would constitute a functional equivalent of, rather than an alternative to, the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation.

One can reasonably surmise, in fact, that the plausibility of the μορφή = condition hypothesis varies in more or less direct proportion to its affinity with the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis. For, as we have seen, the μορφή = condition and the μορφή = οὐσία hypotheses become functionally equivalent once one presupposes that a being's condition must correspond to its nature. If one rejects this presupposition and thus sets the μορφή = condition proposal in opposition to the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation, however, the μορφή = condition interpretation takes on a docetistic color. If the being who exists in the μορφή θεοῦ is not necessarily divine, that is to say, then the being who exists in the μορφή δούλου is not necessarily human.

Now an insubstantial conception of Christ's humanity seems alien to the mind of Paul. For the apostle believes that Christ was "born of woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4); that "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5); that "as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor 15:21); and, most importantly in this context, that Christ "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). Any interpretation according to which Paul, as if hesitant to affirm Christ's full humanity, ascribes to Christ no more than a human condition, therefore, lacks verisimilitude. In spite of the arguments for the μορφή = condition hypothesis, the first and third of which seem relatively cogent, then, the μορφή = condition construal, insofar as it is not functionally equivalent to the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis, appears at least mildly docetistic and, to that extent, improbable.

VI. ΜΟΡΦΗ = ΟΥΣΙΑ

The μορφή = εἰκόν interpretation, the μορφή = *Erscheinungsform* construal, the μορφή = *Kraftsfeld* proposal, and the μορφή = condition hypothesis, consequently, all appear implausible to the extent in which they conflict with the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation. The procedure we have chosen to determine the actual meaning of μορφή in Phil 2:6-7, viz. process of elimination, thus indicates that the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis is probably at least approximately correct. A number of objections, admittedly, might seem to render the μορφή = οὐσία construal implausible. In the following, however, we shall attempt to show that the principal criticisms leveled at the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation do not suffice irreparably to impair its credibility.

1. *The consensus of exegetes.* Critics of the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis argue, first, that twentieth and twenty-first century exegetes almost universally reject this interpretation. Sarah Coakley, for instance, asserts that "one striking point of unanimity in the modern New Testament discussion . . . has been the virtual ruling out of a 'dogmatic' or 'metaphysical' reading of Paul's interests in this passage. It is not . . . a prefiguration of second-century Logos speculation . . . let alone a preview of fourth-century Nicaean

orthodoxy.”⁶⁵ In Coakley’s estimation, “all commentators (or nearly all) concur that it is an anachronism to see Paul or his source expressing anything like the ‘two nature’ Christology of later ‘orthodoxy.’”⁶⁶ According to Coakley, in other words, the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation is hopelessly out of date and therefore unworthy of serious consideration.

One can reach this conclusion, however, only if one fails to take account of numerous, albeit usually unintentional, testimonies that liberal and post-liberal exegetes have rendered to the continuing vitality of this interpretation. Francis Wright Beare, for example, after repeating the customary shibboleths (a) that “the ontological concern of later dogmatic theology is not relevant here”; and (b) that “‘being in the form of God’ is not equivalent to ‘being God’”; states that “*morphē* (form) does, or at least can, retain in the usage of the New Testament its proper sense of ‘form which corresponds to the underlying reality.’”⁶⁷ After cursory reflections on the contrasting senses of μορφή and σχῆμα, moreover, Beare affirms that “the form of God . . . is not to be conceived as a mere appearance, but as a true form of existence which in some sense exhibits Christ’s true nature” and even endorses, albeit with reservations about the term “personality,” the following paraphrase of Phil 2:6a by C. A. Anderson Scott: “In every recognizable aspect of his personality he was from the beginning Divine.”⁶⁸ Although he is loathe to admit it, therefore, Beare seems rather sympathetic to the view that by depicting Christ as ἐν μορφή θεοῦ ὑπάρχων Paul portrays him as ontologically divine.

Werner Kümmel, correspondingly, paraphrases Phil 2:6–11 thus:

Jesus the Christ was in essence like God, but in obedience to God was ready to surrender this likeness to God and to assume the human form of existence, which means being enslaved to the powers of this world. In obedience he even descended further, to the shameful death on the cross. For this reason God has exalted the humiliated One even above his previous divine nature and has given to him the highest name, the name of Lord, so that now all beings in the world should confess Jesus Christ as Lord and thereby honor God.⁶⁹

Evidently, Kümmel dissents from Augustine’s interpretation of Phil 2:6–11. He considers ἴσα indicative of likeness rather than full equality and, accordingly, regards Christ as ontologically subordinate to the Father, even in his divine nature. Nevertheless, Kümmel’s description of Christ as “in essence like God” and his reference to Jesus’ “previous divine nature” strongly suggest that he, too, regards Paul’s ascription of the divine μορφή to Christ as tantamount to an avowal of Christ’s substantial divinity.

Similarly, Ulrich Wilckens elucidates the phrase ἐν μορφή θεοῦ in Phil 2:6 by explaining that “for Hellenistic thought, the essence lies in the

⁶⁵ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 10.

⁶⁷ *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* (BNTC; 3d ed.; London: Black, 1973) 78–79.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 79.

⁶⁹ *The Theology of the New Testament According to its Major Witnesses: Jesus—Paul—John* (trans. John E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 153.

form.⁷⁰ Ugo Vanni paraphrases Phil 2:6a as follows: “he who, existing permanently in the nature of God.”⁷¹ Martin Hengel affirms that “if Christ is identical with the heavenly, *pre-temporal* ‘image of God’, that also means that he was ‘of divine nature’, as we hear at the beginning of the Philippians hymn.”⁷² The translators of the New English Bible render verse 6a thus: “For the divine nature was his from the first”; and Kenneth Grayston celebrates this rendering as “far superior to the conventional translation, ‘being originally in the form of God.’”⁷³

The interpretation of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 as equivalent, in meaning or at least in reference, to οὐσία commands widespread allegiance among evangelical scholars as well. F. F. Bruce, for instance, follows Lightfoot in holding that “the noun *morphē* ‘implies not the external accidents but the essential attributes.’”⁷⁴ Leon Morris, likewise, believes that, by describing Christ as ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, Paul unambiguously ascribes deity to him. “It is not easy,” writes Morris, “to see ‘being in the form of God’ as meaning anything less.”⁷⁵ I. H. Marshall, similarly, affirms that in Phil 2:6–7 “there is described the way in which a being who had the nature of God renounced the privileges of that state and took on the form of a human servant of God.”⁷⁶ David J. MacLeod contends that μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 “refers to nature or essence.”⁷⁷ In the view of Gerald Hawthorne, verse 6a indicates that “Christ was God, possessed of the very nature of God.”⁷⁸ Gordon Fee identifies the phrases ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ and ἴσα θεῷ as “among the strongest expressions of Christ’s deity in the NT”;⁷⁹ and Richard Melick declares that “the NIV correctly translates ‘in the form of God’ as ‘in very nature God.’”⁸⁰

The μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis, broadly construed, thus appears to enjoy substantial support among scholars of quite diverse ideological stripes. Why, then, do Coakley and those who share her views dismiss this position as hopelessly anachronistic and outmoded? One reason more than any other, it seems, suffices to explain the skepticism and even contempt with which Coakley and others regard the position that μορφή means, or at least refers to, an οὐσία in the context of Phil 2:6–7. It is widely thought that this view

⁷⁰ Ulrich Wilckens, *Das Neue Testament, übersetzt und kommentiert von Ulrich Wilckens* (7th ed.; Zürich, Einsiedeln, and Köln: Benziger, 1983) 704, n. 2.

⁷¹ Ugo Vanni, “Ομοίωμα in Paolo (Rom 1, 23; 5, 14; 6, 15; 8, 2; Fil 2, 7): Un’interpretazione esegetico-teologica alla luce dell’uso dei LXX,” *Greg* 58 (1977) 467.

⁷² Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 76.

⁷³ *The Letters of Paul to the Philippians and to the Thessalonians* (CBC; Cambridge: CUP, 1967) 27.

⁷⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians* (NIBC 11; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989) 76.

⁷⁵ Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 43.

⁷⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) 348.

⁷⁷ David J. MacLeod, “Imitating the Incarnation of Christ: An Exposition of Philippians 2:5–8,” *BSac* 158 (2001) 313.

⁷⁸ Hawthorne, *Philippians* 84.

⁷⁹ Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 207–8.

⁸⁰ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* 102.

commits one to holding that Paul, or an antecedent composer of Phil 2:6–11, employs technical, philosophical vocabulary in a kerygmatic setting.⁸¹

2. *Philosophical terminology?* Stephen Fowl typifies the concern expressed in this objection when he writes, “Most modern commentators reject Lightfoot’s reading of μορφή which, based on Plato and Aristotle, construed μορφή in the light of οὐσία.”⁸² Likewise, comments Ralph Martin, “there is now a continuing consensus that μορφή cannot be used in a philosophical sense, as meaning ‘form’ or ‘being.’”⁸³ It is instructive to observe that neither Fowl nor Martin considers the possibility that Paul might employ μορφή in a substantial sense without drawing on specifically philosophical vocabulary. They appear, rather, to presuppose that if Paul employs μορφή in the sense of οὐσία in Phil 2:6–7, he must have recourse to technical, philosophical terminology.

Now the idea that Paul would address impoverished and frequently illiterate lay Christians in such language seems intuitively absurd. Contemporary interpreters of Philippians, nonetheless, seem largely to equate the μορφή = οὐσία hypothesis with the view that Paul does just this. It is only to be expected, therefore, that they either (a) consistently reject construals of μορφή in the sense of οὐσία; or (b) if they recognize that μορφή must bear a substantial sense in Phil 2:6–7, couch this understanding in terms far removed from an explicit claim that in these verses μορφή signifies something like οὐσία.

One can refute this objection, it seems, if one can show that an author unfamiliar with technical philosophy could employ μορφή and communicate thereby the meaning οὐσία to an uncultured audience. This is not a particularly daunting task. As Lucien Cerfaux explains, the term μορφή ordinarily “expresses the way in which a thing, being what it is in itself, appears to our senses. If this word is applied to God, his μορφή will be his deepest being, which cannot be reached by our understanding or sight, precisely because God is ἄορατος: in fact the word has meaning here only as referring to the reality of God’s being.”⁸⁴

Now Paul affirms divine invisibility in unmistakable terms (Rom 1:20; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16). It seems probable, therefore, that an audience of his disciples would take language about the divine μορφή to refer to the divine essence, as Cerfaux suggests. In any event, Paul’s reference to Christ’s death on the cross in Phil 2:8 makes it plain that the μορφή δούλου of verse 7

⁸¹ We realize that some also object to the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation on the grounds that Paul would not employ language suggestive of Christ’s ontological divinity. In our view, however, Paul’s association of Christ with God in such texts as Acts 20:28; Rom 9:5; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 2:9; and Titus 2:13 renders extended consideration of this objection unnecessary.

⁸² Stephen Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (JSNTSup 36; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 49.

⁸³ Martin, *Carmen Christi* xix.

⁸⁴ *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul* (trans. Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker; New York: Herder, 1959) 385.

refers to the very being of a man and not merely to a human appearance. The parallelism of the human μορφή in verse 7 and the divine μορφή in verse 8, accordingly, would suggest to anyone who pondered the hymn as a whole that the phrase μορφή θεοῦ refers to the divine nature and not to a transitory, visible manifestation of God's glory. The principal objection to the μορφή = οὐσία interpretation, then, seems to arise from a failure to distinguish philosophical employment of μορφή in the sense of οὐσία from non-technical employment of μορφή in the same sense, or, perhaps, rather the denial of the possibility of such a non-technical usage.

3. *Conclusion.* No peremptory objection, then, appears to stand in the way of acceptance of the μορφή = οὐσία proposal. In conclusion of this section, therefore, we should like to underline what we consider the best reason for adopting this proposal. Among the five options to which we have restricted ourselves, the μορφή = οὐσία construal is the only thoroughly anti-docetistic interpretation. If Paul means by μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 no more than an εἰκόν, an *Erscheinungsform*, a *Kraftfeld*, or a condition, then he asserts in verse 7 that Christ assumed only the εἰκόν, the *Erscheinungsform*, the *Kraftfeld*, or the condition of a human being.

In order to perform the obedience referred to in verse 8, however, Christ requires more than all of these; he must assume the nature of a servant and no less in order to die the agonizing, shameful death which verse 8, along with the entire NT, attributes to him. No construal of μορφή in Phil 2:7 according to which it does not at least obliquely refer to a φύσις or οὐσία, therefore, merits the credit of one who takes a realist, anti-docetistic view of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Because the context demands that μορφή in verse 6 bears the same meaning it conveys in verse 7, moreover, any plausible interpretation of μορφή in these verses must assign a substantial meaning to Christ's "form of God" and to his "form of a servant." It seems, accordingly (a) that any true interpretation of μορφή in Phil 2:6–7 must at least approximate the μορφή = οὐσία construal; and (b) that Phil 2:6–7 does, consequently, contemporary skepticism notwithstanding, teach that Christ possesses both a divine and a human nature.

VII. CONCLUSION

This conclusion, naturally, is rife with implications for the theological interpretation of Scripture. If Phil 2:6–7 teaches that Christ possesses two natures, then, given the presuppositions that God is simple and that the possibilities of change and inequality within the deity are, therefore, excluded, it seems that one can reasonably employ Phil 2:6–7 as a "canonical rule" for biblical exegesis along the lines suggested by Augustine. On the basis of Phil 2:6–7, that is to say, one can understand that Christ does not implicitly deny his ontological divinity when he utters such words as "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) and "not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42 par. Matt 26:39, Mark 14:36); and that he in no way disavows his full humanity when he claims "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and "before

Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Philippians 2:6–7 implies rather that the first two remarks, which portray Christ as subordinate to the Father, refer to the "form of a servant," i.e. Christ's human nature, and that the second two remarks, which portray Christ as equal to the Father, refer to the "form of God," i.e. Christ's substantial deity. Since Phil 2:6–7 indicates that Christ exists both in the "form of a God" and in the "form of a servant," then, each set of statements can characterize the same Christ without inconsistency.