

ΜΟΡΦΗ ΘΕΟΥ AS A SIGNIFIER OF SOCIAL STATUS IN PHILIPPIANS 2:6

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Philippians 2:6–11 has attracted more scholarly attention than any passage in the Pauline corpus. One does not need to read far into the text to run up against the first of several highly debated expressions: ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων (v. 6). I will maintain that Paul has used the expression ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ in Phil 2:6 as a status marker with no inherent ontological component.¹ Translations like the NIV’s “in very nature God” erroneously import an ontological element into a text concerned to address matters of power and social status. Reading μορφῇ in terms of status is hardly new. The interpretation can be traced back at least as far as the seminal work of Eduard Schweizer.² A good deal more remains to be said in favor of Schweizer’s view, however, and it is timely to do so in light of current attempts to revive the traditional interpretation of μορφῇ that equates the term with οὐσία, or (God’s) essential nature.³

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¹ I assume throughout that Paul authored Phil 2:6–11 as part of the letter. The other option—that verses 6–11 constitute a pre-Pauline tradition—must be argued anew in view of increasing numbers of commentators who see the passage as a Pauline composition (among others, M. Hooker, “Philippians 2, 6–11,” in *Jesus und Paulus: Festschrift für W.G. Kümmel* [ed. E. E. Ellis and E. Grässer; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978] 151–64; N. T. Wright “ἀραγμός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11,” *JTS* 37 [1986] 351–52; S. E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990] 31–45; G. Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11: Hymn or Exalted Prose?” *BBR* 2 [1992] 29–46; R. Gundry, “Style and Substance in ‘The Myth of God Incarnate’ according to Philippians 2:6–11,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder* [ed. S. E. Porter, P. Joyce, and D. E. Orton; Leiden: Brill, 1994] 271–93; R. Brucker, *Christushymnen oder “epideiktische Passagen”?* *Studien zum Stilwechsel im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* [FRLANT 176; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997] 21–22, 349–50; M. Tellbe, *Paul Between Synagogue and State* [Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001] 254; A. Y. Collins, “Psalms, Philippians 2:6–11, and the Origins of Christology,” *BibInt* 1.3/4 [2002] 370–71; J. Lambrecht, “The Identity of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2,6–11),” in *Understanding What One Reads: New Testament Essays* [ed. V. Koperski; Leuven: Peeters, 2003] 255; J. H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum* [SNTSMS 132; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005] 155–56).

² E. Schweizer, *Erniedrigung und Erhöhung bei Jesus und seinen Nachfolgern* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1955). R. Martin finds the view attractive, as well (*Philippians* [NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 96). O. Hofius (*Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6–11* [WUNT 17; 2d ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991] 57–59) subsequently supported Schweizer on this point.

³ Most recently, D. W. Jowers (“The Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ in Philippians 2:6–7,” *JETS* 49.4 [2006]) 739–66).

This is not to say that a secondary argument cannot be made from the text for the deity of Christ. I am confessedly Nicene in my Christology and do not intend in what follows to challenge or otherwise compromise the doctrine of the deity of Christ. Indeed, for Paul to assert that the preincarnate Christ somehow participated in God's exalted status fairly invites further reflections about the nature of this Messiah.⁴ Such reflections are rather beside the point, however, in the present connection. I wish to suggest that Paul's designs in the passage are not primarily Christological. They are ecclesiological. Or, perhaps more accurately, what we have in Phil 2:6–11 is Christology in the service of an overarching ecclesiological agenda. Accordingly, Paul's point in verse 6 is not that Christ was somehow ontologically "God" before the incarnation. Paul's aim is to inform his readers that Christ enjoyed "equality with God" with respect to power and status. And it is Christ's attitude toward his privileged position that Paul draws upon in the text to encourage the Philippians to act similarly in their mutual relations in the Jesus community in the colony (v. 5).⁵

I. INTRODUCTION

Our examination of μορφή in Phil 2:6 will include broad considerations of social background, as well as the more familiar concerns of lexicography and literary context. As a point of departure, the preoccupation with status and hierarchy that characterized the relational world of Roman Philippi should predispose us to read the debatable portions of Paul's grand Christological narrative in terms of status, not ontology, unless otherwise constrained by the meaning of the terms in question or by the surrounding context. The semantic range of μορφή certainly allows for an ontological element. But it does not demand it. Conceptual parallels to the expression τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ (v. 6), moreover, which portray emperors enjoying equality with the gods, have in view the ruler's power and position, not his nature or essence. The presence

⁴ See, especially, verses 9–11, where Christ is identified with the prophet Isaiah's YHWH. I am more optimistic, therefore, than R. Morgan, who claims that "on close inspection the apparent links between this passage and orthodox Christian belief will scarcely bear the weight that has been laid upon them" ("Incarnation, Myth, and Theology," in *Where Christology Began* [ed. R. P. Martin and B. J. Dodd; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998] 68). With Morgan, however, I do not believe that one can make a strong case for Christ's deity from the meaning of μορφή θεοῦ in its present context in Philippians 2.

⁵ I reject E. Käsemann's kerygmatic reading of the passage ("Kritische Analyse von Phil. 2, 5–11," *ZTK* 47 [1950] 313–60) and adopt, instead, the more widely held ethical interpretation, whereby Paul presents Christ as *exemplum imitandum*. As Morgan has so eloquently explained, attempts like Käsemann's and Barth's to argue for an "anti-imitatio" reading of Philippians 2:6–11 (over against a "common sense" understanding of the text in terms of ethics) find their origins in the sharp reaction to old liberalism's ethical idealism which characterized mid-twentieth century German NT scholarship ("Incarnation, Myth, and Theology" 55; see the challenges to Käsemann's interpretation posed by L. Hurtado, "Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5–11," in *From Jesus to Paul: Essays in Honour of Francis Wright Beare* [ed. P. Richardson and J. C. Hurd; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984] 113–26; and P. T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 253–62).

of τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ in our passage suggests that μορφῆ θεοῦ in the same sentence ought to be read accordingly.

Some argue for a substantial sense for μορφῆ θεοῦ, however, from the parallel expression in the ensuing verse: μορφὴν δούλου (v. 7). Christ's outward appearance ("form") corresponded to an inward reality (ontology) when he took on "the form of a slave." The same must obtain for μορφῆ θεοῦ in verse 6. Or so it is argued. The logic breaks down, however, due to a faulty premise. I will maintain, instead, that μορφὴν δούλου, like its parallel in verse 6, lacks any ontological component and cannot therefore be used as an argument for an essentialist interpretation of μορφῆ θεοῦ in verse 6. Paul's audience in Philippi would have heard both expressions as explicit references to Christ's social status (as indicated by his outward appearance) and the corresponding ability (or, in the case of μορφὴν δούλου, inability) to exercise power and authority that comes with such a position.⁶

II. HONOR AND STATUS: THE SOCIAL WORLD OF ROMAN PHILIPPI

Rome was the most status-oriented society in Mediterranean antiquity. And no city in the Greek East was more Roman—and thus more preoccupied with honorary titles, public recognition, and social status—than the veteran colony at Philippi. I am hardly original in these assertions. For more than a generation social historians have been highly sensitive to the centrality of honor and rank among the Romans. Over three decades ago, for example, M. Reinhold, in the course of an essay dealing with the history of purple as an ancient status symbol, labeled Roman society "the most status-symbol-conscious culture of the ancient world."⁷ Recent treatments of Roman social priorities and practices decidedly confirm Reinhold's categorical assertion.⁸

1. *The Roman colony at Philippi.* The uniqueness of Philippi among the numerous municipalities in the East has also attracted scholarly attention. The establishment of the settlement as a distinctly Augustan colony is a well-known historical fact. Peter Pilhofer's catalogue of inscriptions from the colony has now made the social world of Philippi more accessible to the broader scholarly community.⁹ In an important summary of his findings,

⁶ It is beyond the scope of my project to interact with Käsemann's μορφῆ = *Kraftfeld* hypothesis ("Kritische Analyse von Phil. 2, 5–11"). The Hellenistic parallels Käsemann adduces seem rather far removed from the status concerns of the rest of the passage, concerns which cohere rather nicely with the social world of Paul's Philippian audience. The grammar of the clause (ἐν + ὑπάρχων), which appears to favor the *Kraftfeld* view, can otherwise be explained, as well (Jowers, "Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ" 753–57; see also Part V below).

⁷ M. Reinhold, *The History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity* (Brussels: Latomus, 1970) 38.

⁸ J. L. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); C. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁹ P. Pilhofer, *Philippi. Band 2: Katalog der Inschriften von Philippi* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2000).

Pilhofer emphasized the Romanness of Philippi, compared to other towns in the Greek East, and he commented in some detail about the preoccupation with honorific titles and offices which characterized the social priorities of both elite and non-elite persons in the colony.¹⁰ A careful reading of the epigraphic data confirms Pilhofer's analysis on both counts.

The residents of Philippi replicated Rome's culture of status and honor at every turn. The Roman *cursus honorum* was reproduced in miniature among the colony's local aristocracy, as members of the decurion council competed for an ascending series of offices that included the honors of quaestor, aedile, and duumvir. Those who attained such heights publicly proclaimed their achievements in inscriptions erected throughout the colony. Works of public benefaction provided local elites with further opportunities to promote themselves—and to be publicly acknowledged and honored by the grateful beneficiaries of their generosity. Civic religion also functioned to reinforce the social hierarchy. Elites gave direction to a thriving imperial cult that stood at the center of religious life in Philippi, by dispensing to specific classes of persons in the colony the various priesthoods associated with emperor worship.

Philippi's lower classes also responded enthusiastically to honor's siren call. Non-elites who belonged to voluntary associations replicated the practices of their social betters within the confines of their cult and trade groups. Worshippers of the god Silvanus (the best attested voluntary association in Philippi), for example, won honorific offices, and they saw their names and titles etched in stone in return for gifts to the cult, in much the same way that wealthy elites received public honors for their much more substantial works of benefaction.

2. The biblical materials related to Philippi. The biblical materials evince a remarkable sensitivity both to the Roman orientation of Philippi and to the pride of honors that characterized the relational ethos of the colony's inhabitants. The Philippian narrative in Acts, for example, contains four anomalous bits of social realia that can best be accounted for by assuming that the author was directly aware of the cultural values and social codes that shaped daily life in the colony:

1. Paul visited at least nine Roman colonies during his journeys in Acts. Philippi alone is specifically designated as "a Roman colony" (16:12).¹¹
2. Only in Philippi do local residents accuse Paul's team of "advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe" (16:21).

¹⁰ P. Pilhofer, *Philippi*. Band 1: *Die erste christliche Gemeinde Europas* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995). On Roman influence in the colony Pilhofer remarks,

Wer—wie Paulus—aus dem Osten nach Philippi kam, kam in eine andere Welt. Römische Kolonien konnte man auch in Kleinasien besuchen, aber keine was auch nur annähernd so »römische« wie Philippi (*Philippi* 1.92).

¹¹ Pilhofer (*Philippi* 1.159–60) identifies eight other colonies: Pisidian Antioch (13:14; 14:19–20), Iconium (13:51; 14:1, 19, 21; 16:2), Lystra (14:6, 8, 21; 16:1–2), Alexandria Troas (16:8, 11; 20:5–6), Corinth (18:1; 19:1), Ptolemais (21:7), Syracuse (28:12), and Puteoli (28:13).

3. Only in the Philippians narrative does Luke use technical terms for the titles of the colony's magistrates and other officials (στρατηγοί [16:20, 22, 35, 36, 38]; ῥαβδοῦχοι [16:35, 38]; δεσμοφύλαξ [16:23, 27, 36]).¹²
4. Roman citizenship becomes a central concern in the Philippian narrative (16:35–39). This is unique among Paul's various experiences during his missionary journeys (Acts 13–20).

The first two items underscore Luke's awareness of the Romanness of Philippi. The remaining anomalies suggest that our author was also well attuned to the status concerns of the local population. The citizenship *topos* is particularly enlightening. More than one-half of the Latin inscriptions from Philippi contain reference to the person's Roman citizen tribe. The franchise was apparently a key social commodity in the colony. It is hardly accidental that Luke highlights Roman citizenship as an issue for Paul and Silas in Acts 16.

Paul's letter to the Philippians similarly resonates in some strikingly particular ways against the social world of the recipients. The greeting is highly anomalous (1:1). Only in Philippians does Paul refer to himself as a servant without the accompanying designation "apostle." And only in Philippians does Paul defer to church leaders by addressing them with their formal titles ("bishops and deacons"). Paul here models what he will enjoin later in the epistle: "in humility regard others as better than yourselves" (2:3). The way that he does so, however, betrays an intimate awareness of the preoccupation with honorific titles that marked the social world of the Philippians.¹³

The use of citizenship terminology for the Christian life is also unique to the letter (1:27 [πολιτεύεσθε]; 3:20 [πολίτευμα]), as is the structure of Paul's autobiographical reflections in 3:4–6. The asyndetic economy of language in 3:4–6, the order in which Paul enumerates his Jewish honors (ascribed honor followed by achieved honor), and the presence in the list of Paul's "citizen" tribe ("Benjamin") combine to suggest that Paul sought intentionally to mimic the honor inscriptions that confronted his readers on a daily basis throughout the colony. Paul intended his autobiographical reflections to be understood as a list of Jewish honors structured in Roman *cursus* form.

Finally, Paul's portrayal of Jesus in Philippians 2 has clearly been framed with status concerns in mind. The exaltation of Christ in verses 9–11 constitutes the most obvious evidence along these lines, but the rest of the narrative

¹² The στρατηγοί are the *duumviri iure dicundo*, the top civic officers in the colony. The term ῥαβδοῦχοι corresponds, in turn, to the Latin *lictiores*, a title for persons who proceeded before the chief magistrates bearing the *fascēs*, which symbolized magisterial authority.

¹³ As my external reviewer insightfully observed, Epaphroditus is the only individual accorded the title "apostle" in Philippians (2:25), and he is also likely the person most in need of status elevation in the Christian community in the colony. Epaphroditus is apparently returning to Philippi prematurely, and Paul seems to be concerned about the way in which the Philippians might interpret the abbreviated visit. I treat Paul's description of Epaphroditus—and Paul's challenge to the church to "honor such people" (2:29)—in some detail in J. H. Hellerman, "Brothers and Friends in Philippi: Family Honor in the Roman World and in Paul's Letter to the Philippians," *BTB* 39 (2009) 20–21, 23.

speaks to issues of rank, honor, and power, as well. Only in Phil 2:7 among all of Paul's writings, for example, does Paul refer to Jesus as δούλος. The contextual juxtaposition of this anomalous designation with the emphatic expression θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ (v. 8) should not be missed. Slavery and crucifixion were closely related ideas in the symbolic universe of Paul's audience. Slavery was the most degrading legal status in the Roman world. Death on a cross was the most humiliating public experience imaginable among the ancients. Indeed, crucifixion was viewed as a punishment appropriate for slaves, and the connection between the two ideas was such a common one that the Romans could refer to crucifixion with a convenient circumlocution: "a slave's punishment" (*servile supplicium*).

I developed these materials in some detail elsewhere and have summarized them here only to emphasize a commonly acknowledged principle of human communication: language cannot be properly understood apart from its social context.¹⁴ The relational world of Paul's audience should therefore be factored in as a primary consideration when we attempt to adjudicate among alternative interpretations of the various debatable expressions in Phil 2:6–11. Treatments of the meaning of μορφή θεοῦ have generally ignored the social priorities and practices of the residents of Roman Philippi entirely.¹⁵

III. LEXICOGRAPHY: THE SEMANTIC RANGE OF ΜΟΡΦΗ

The term μορφή and its cognates refer most basically to "visible appearance," and, depending on the context, the word-group may or may not bear an ontological component. The two broad options can be illustrated from numerous Biblical and extra-Biblical texts. I will cite only a few examples.

1. *The μορφή word-group used non-substantially.* μορφή and its cognates are often used to refer simply to visible appearance, with no indication, one way or another, of any corresponding inward reality. Mark 16:12 is a case in point: "After this he appeared in another form (ἐφανερώθη ἐν ἑτέρᾳ μορφῇ) to two of them, as they were walking into the country." So, also, is Wisdom 18:1: "Their enemies heard their voices but did not see their forms" (μορφήν; see also Philo, *Leg. Gai.* 299; Herm. *Vis.* 3.10.2).¹⁶

In the above texts the μορφή word group does not bear an ontological component. In other texts μορφή *cannot* correspond substantially to the object or person to which the term refers. This becomes particularly evident where

¹⁴ For detailed support of the various assertions made in the above overview of the social world of the colony at Philippi, see J. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor* (chaps. 3–4); "Brothers and Friends in Philippi" 15–25; and "Vindicating God's Servants in Philippi and in Philippians: The Influence of Paul's Ministry in Philippi upon the Composition of Philippians 2:6–11," *BBR* (2010) forthcoming.

¹⁵ Those who do consider in any detail the context of the recipients of Paul's letter to the Philippians tend to focus upon the hearers' ideological (rather than social) context (e.g. D. Zeller, "New Testament Christology in its Hellenistic Reception," *NTS* 46 [2001] 312–33). C. Osiek's commentary on the epistle is a welcome exception (*Philippians, Philemon* [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2000]).

¹⁶ Jowers ("Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ" 747) cites a number of references that fit this category.

an alteration of μορφή is in view in a context in which the subject retains its essential nature. Both Matthew and Mark describe the Transfiguration of Jesus with the phrase μεταμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν, for example, and they proceed to depict the change that occurs in terms of visible appearance (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:2). One would be hard pressed to maintain that Jesus underwent some kind of ontological transformation during his experience on the mountain. Here, then, the μορφ- component of the verb μεταμορφῶ necessarily lacks completely any substantial element (see also Plato, *Resp.* 2.380.D).

Still other texts use μορφή and its cognates in a manner that directly contradicts the inward reality of the object in view. Consider 2 Tim 2:5: “holding to the outward form of godliness (μόρφωσιν εὐσεβείας) but denying its power.” Similarly, Plutarch compares uneducated rulers to “colossal statues which have a heroic and godlike form (μορφήν) on the outside but inside are full of clay, stone, and lead” (Plut. *Ad Princ. Inerud.* 780a).

What is clear from these examples is that μορφή and its cognates do not necessarily carry an ontological component that corresponds to the outward form of the object or person in view. Most often, μορφή refers simply to “visible appearance,” in contexts where ontology is completely beside the point, as in Mark 16:12, above. In other instances, a substantial reading is necessarily excluded by contextual or theological considerations (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:2). Still other texts use μορφή to refer to an outward appearance that differs markedly from the inward reality of the referent (2 Tim 3:5). There is, therefore, no necessary correlation in the use of the term between form (visible appearance) and substance (essential nature). The μορφή word group can, however, be used in a substantial sense, and we find illustrations of this usage, as well, in biblical and non-biblical literature alike.

2. The μορφή word group used substantially. The substantial use of the μορφή word group had a long and distinguished pedigree. Both Plato (*Phaed.* 103e; *Resp.* 381c) and Aristotle (*Met.* 11.1060b; *Phys.* 2.1.193b) used μορφή in a sense approximating the meaning of οὐσία. Later authors followed suit (Plut. *Quaest. plat.* 1003b; *Def. orac.* 429a; Philo *Spec.* 1.327–28). It is also quite clear that Paul himself used the word group in a substantial sense when he took up the matter of the spiritual development of his converts, at least where the cognate verb is concerned:

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed (μορφωθῆ) in you. (Gal 4:19)

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed (συμμόρφους) to the image of his Son. (Rom 8:29; see also μεταμορφουῖσθε, 12:2)

More than outward appearance is clearly in view in the transformation Paul anticipates in the lives of his readers. Numbers of commentators have used these examples to argue for an ontological component for μορφή in Phil 2:6.¹⁷

¹⁷ For example, G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC 43; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 83–84. J. B. Lightfoot, too, used the philosophical sense of the term to argue for an ontological reading of μορφή in Philippians 2:6 (*St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [London: Macmillan, 1894] 127–33).

This is certainly possible. Even Paul uses the μορφή word group in a non-substantial sense, however, and he does so in the third chapter of Philippians, where matters of visible appearance and prestige are, once again, at the forefront of the apostle's mind: "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed (σύμμορφον) to the body of his glory" (Phil 3:21).¹⁸

3. *Some important recent findings.* It might appear that lexical considerations alone are not much help in determining the meaning of μορφή in our passage, since the word group can, indeed, bear an ontological sense—where the outward appearance referred to by μορφή and its cognates corresponds to some essential reality—but it does not have to do so. Recent research conclusively demonstrates, however, that the vast majority of occurrences of the noun μορφή in Hellenistic Greek (with which Paul would have been most familiar) connote visible appearance *sans* ontology. D. Fabricatore's exhaustive study of μορφή generated the following conclusion, in this regard:

It has been shown that μορφή has a narrow semantic range, including the dominant concept of the form or shape of someone or something that is *observable to the eyes*. In a few rare examples, μορφή refers to the idea of essence or nature. In addition, μορφή is used in conjunction with other terms such as εικόν, ἰδέα, φύσις, σχῆμα, ὁμοιότητα, and εἶδος. This variety is seen in non-theological writers. When it comes to the Septuagint and other theological writers, the uses all relate to the form or shape of something, which is the dominant use among the hellenistic Greek writers.¹⁹

To be sure, we must look beyond the confines of lexicography to determine whether Paul has ontology or status primarily in view in the expression μορφή θεοῦ. Fabricatore's study strongly suggests, however, that we should initially adopt a non-substantial reading of μορφή in Phil 2:6, unless contextual issues persuasively argue the contrary.²⁰

¹⁸ Readers who assume Pauline authorship for the Pastoral Epistles will, of course, have readily at hand a patently non-substantial instance of the cognate μόρφωσις in 2 Tim 3:5 (see above).

¹⁹ D. Fabricatore, *A Lexical, Exegetical, and Theological Examination of the Greek Noun μορφή in Philippians 2:6–7* (Ph.D. diss., Baptist Bible Seminary, 2008) 105 (emphasis mine). Fabricatore is the first scholar, to my knowledge, to have employed the resources of UC Irvine's *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* in the study of μορφή. See Chapter 4 of his dissertation for a thorough and insightful survey of the use of the word from Homer through the early Church Fathers.

²⁰ I have intentionally refrained from considering here whether or not μορφή alone can bear the meaning "status" or "social condition." Those who wish to pursue this question should consult Jowers and the evidence he cites ("Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ" 758–60; see also R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii. 5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* [rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] xx). What I will argue for below is a more general connection between the ideas of visible appearance (which μορφή clearly connotes) and social status. Individual words must be situated in both their literary and social contexts. Those who seek for a one-to-one correspondence between two words or expressions (μορφή = "status," for example) often attend to the former but not to the latter. In the symbolic and social world shared by the apostle and his readers, Paul's reference to "the visible appearance of God" (μορφή θεοῦ) in Phil 2:6 would almost certainly have resonated within the interrelated semantic fields of honor, prestige, and status.

III. ΤΟ ΕΙΝΑΙ ΙΣΑ ΘΕ
AND THE IDEA OF RULERS AS “EQUAL TO GOD”

The expression τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ (v. 6) also suggests that μορφή θεοῦ earlier in the verse should be read non-substantially, referring to social status rather than to ontology. To see why this is the case we must briefly revisit the ongoing debate over the term ἀρπαγμόν. Although there remain some vocal dissenters, current scholarly consensus understands Christ’s equality with God to be something that Christ possessed and chose not to exploit, rather than something that he lacked and chose not to grasp.²¹ The difference relates to the meaning assigned to ἀρπαγμόν. The preferred interpretation is now reflected in the NRSV translation: “[he] did not regard equality with God as *something to be exploited*.”²²

²¹ These two options represent an acute oversimplification of a highly complex issue, but one that will have to suffice within the constraints of the present project. See the following note for more thorough and nuanced discussions of the meaning of ἀρπαγμόν.

²² Emphasis mine. R. Hoover made the seminal contribution to the debate (“The HARPAGMOS Enigma: A Philological Solution,” *HTR* 64 [1971] 95–119). The place to begin to sort out the various options for the interpretation of ἀρπαγμόν, however, is Wright’s helpful overview (“ἀρπαγμός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11”). More recently, S. E. Fowl has identified Hoover’s interpretation, as defended by Wright, as “the definitive word on the clause” (“Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2:5–11,” in *Where Christology Began* 142). It has been adopted by many commentators, including O’Brien, *Philippians* 214–16; U. Müller, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper* (THNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1993) 94; and G. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 206.

Some, however, still interpret ἀρπαγμόν otherwise. J. D. G. Dunn builds on the work of J. C. O’Neill (“Hoover on *Harpagmos* Reviewed, with a Modest Proposal Concerning Philippians 2:6,” *HTR* 81 [1988] 445–49) to support the older interpretation, “something to be grasped” (Dunn, “Christ, Adam, and Preexistence,” in *Where Christology Began* 77). According to Dunn’s reading, Christ—a human being existing, like Adam, in the image of God (ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων)—did not possess τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ. Christ (unlike Adam), however, did not consider “equality with God” as “something to be grasped.” Dunn thus distinguishes sharply between μορφή θεοῦ and τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ. I take the two expressions to be mutually referential.

S. Vollenweider (“Der ‘Raub’ der Gottgleichheit: Ein Religionsgeschichtlicher Vorschlag zu Phil. 2.6(–11),” *NTS* 45 [1999]) has recently mounted the most persuasive challenge to the dominant view of the meaning of ἀρπαγμόν. He argues, from biblical, Jewish, and Hellenistic traditions, that the imagery reflected in the statement οὐκ ἀρπαγμόν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ should be taken in a wholly negative sense. In contrast to the hubris of god-like kings, who attempted to usurp equality with God that was not theirs to possess, Christ did not regard “equality with God” as “booty” (ἀρπαγμόν).

It is too early to assess the impact of Vollenweider’s interpretation upon the ongoing debate about the meaning of ἀρπαγμόν in Phil 2:6, and the present discussion will proceed under the rubric of the consensus position, which interprets ἀρπαγμόν as “something to be exploited” (NRSV). Vollenweider’s essay deserves more attention here than space allows, however, and some comments are in order regarding the implications of his findings for the project at hand.

As Vollenweider notes, his interpretation functions reasonably well in the context of Phil 2:6, whether or not one assumes that Christ occupied the position reflected in τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ before the incarnation. Vollenweider opts for the latter understanding (*res rapienda*): in v. 6b Christ refuses to grasp at an “equality with God” that was not his before the incarnation, but which he will ultimately gain through his exaltation in vv. 9–11 (Collins [“Psalms, Philippians 2:6–11” 366–67] supports Vollenweider here). Vollenweider acknowledges, however, that this view, which sharply distinguishes between “form of God” and “equality with God,” renders the interpretation of μορφή

The above understanding of ἀρπαγμόν gives the impression that both ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων and τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ characterized Christ before the incarnation. This, along with the grammar of the sentence, suggests, moreover, that μορφῇ θεοῦ and εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ are semantically related: “Paul intends the infinitive phrase (‘to be equal with God’) to repeat in essence the sense of what preceded (‘being in the “form” of God’).”²³ Accordingly, we should expect εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ to shed light upon the meaning of μορφῇ θεοῦ. The light that is shed, however, does not support a substantial interpretation of μορφῇ θεοῦ, since both (a) the meaning of ἀρπαγμόν and (b) literary parallels to εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ make it problematic to read the latter expression in terms of ontology.

Given the meaning of ἀρπαγμόν outlined above, it is somewhat difficult to discern how Christ could potentially have regarded his οὐσία or essential nature as “something to be exploited.” How does one exploit one’s essence? The problem is immediately resolved by taking εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ (and, by extension, μορφῇ θεοῦ) in a non-substantial sense, referring to rank or status. For it is quite easy to see how Christ could have regarded his position of power and prestige as “something to be exploited.” And “position of power” or “authority” is precisely the way in which the idea “equality with God” is used in several biblical and extrabiblical parallels.

A variety of sources specifically associates the idea of equality with God with the position of a king or emperor, using language similar to Paul’s. And given the centrality of the imperial cult in the social and religious life of the colony at Philippi, it is quite likely that Paul has emperor veneration directly in view in εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ in Phil 2:6.²⁴ In each of the conceptual parallels,

θεοῦ more problematic than does the reading (advocated herein) that equates the two expressions and assigns both to Christ’s pretemporal existence (“Der ‘Raub’ der Gottgleichheit” 428–29).

²³ Fee (*Philippians*, 207, author’s emphasis). So, also, N. T. Wright (*The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress 1992] 83); G. Hawthorne (“In the Form of God and Equal with God [Philippians 2:6],” in *Where Christology Began* 104); R. Bauckham (*God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 57); J. Lambrecht (“The Identity of Christ” 257). Fee argues further for such an understanding from the “emphatic first position” placement of οὐχ ἀρπαγμόν in the double accusative construction (*Philippians* 207).

Some have cited the anaphoric use of the article (τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ) in support of a semantic relationship between μορφῇ θεοῦ and εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ (Wright, “ἀρπαγμός” 344). D. Wallace (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003] 220) and D. Burk (“On the Articular Infinitive in Philippians 2:6: A Grammatical Note with Christological Implications,” *TynB* 55 [2004] 253–74) maintain, however, that the article is used here simply to mark the object in a double accusative construction. They are correct, of course, but I suspect that the article here is doing double duty—both clarifying an object-complement construction and referring back anaphorically to ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων in the immediately preceding clause. The elegant utility of the Greek article would seem to allow for such a possibility, as Wallace himself acknowledges elsewhere, for example, in Phil 1:22 (where the article in τὸ ζῆν functions, according to Wallace, “both as a substantant of the infinitive and anaphorically”) and in Acts 14:4 (where the articles [οἱ μὲν ἦσαν σὺν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις, οἱ δὲ] are both pronominal and anaphoric [referring back to τὸ πλῆθος τῆς πόλεως]; Wallace, *Greek Grammar* 210, 235).

²⁴ On the imperial cult in Philippi see L. Bormann (*Philippi: Stadt und Christgemeinde zur Zeit des Paulus* [Leiden: Brill, 1995] 32–67) and Helleman (*Reconstructing Honor* 80–87). Note also D. Seeley’s treatment of the passage against the more general background of Greco-Roman ruler

moreover, the ruler-to-god comparison relates to status, honor, and/or the exercise of authority—not to substance or essential nature.²⁵ For example, a second-century AD papyrus reads τὸ θεός; τὸ κρατοῦν. τὸ βασιλεύς; ἰσόθεος. “What is a God? Exercising power; What is a king? One who is equal with a God” (*Pap. Heid.* 1716.5). The point is that a king is in a position to exercise God-like power.

Another text finds the Seleucid dynast Antiochus IV finally acknowledging the foolishness of claiming for himself divine honors: “It is just to submit oneself to God and not to think that one who is mortal is equal to God (ἰσόθεα)” (2 Macc 9:12). One could, perhaps, argue that ἰσόθεα here connotes divine identity. The surrounding context demonstrates, however, that it is the exercise of God-like authority—not ontology—that is primarily in view in the expression. Before God disciplined Antiochus, the king “had thought in his superhuman arrogance that he could command the waves of the sea, and had imagined that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance” (2 Macc 9:8). The text thus frames ἰσόθεα in terms of divine power and prerogative. There is no hint anywhere that Antiochus claimed to share God’s οὐσία. A final piece of evidence comes from Appian, who uses language similar to Paul’s ἴσα θεῶ terminology when he discusses the honors given to Julius Caesar by Augustus. Augustus’s actions on behalf of Caesar provided the blueprint for later emperors to receive honors “equal to gods” (ἰσόθεοι; *BCiv.* 2.148). Rank and honor are, again, at the center of the semantic force of the expression. Osiek is quite right, therefore, to conclude the following about ἴσα θεῶ in Phil 2:6:

When applied to persons in this very status-conscious culture, it is more likely to mean equality of status or importance in a hierarchical order. It is not likely to mean what modern interpreters would want to read into the hymn, namely, equality of nature or substance with God. In other words, it is not a metaphysical but a social statement.²⁶

The way in which τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ functions in relation to ἀρπαγμὸν in Phil 2:6, therefore, along with the literary parallels cited above, suggests that we should interpret τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ in terms of status and authority—not ontology. The contextual relationship between this expression and μορφή θεοῦ earlier in the verse encourages us, in turn, to assign a non-ontological meaning to μορφή θεοῦ, as well, a judgment that will be decidedly confirmed by an examination of the parallel expression (μορφήν δούλου) in the verse that follows.

worship (“The Background of the Philippians Hymn [2:6–11],” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 1 [1994] 49–72) and, more recently, P. Oakes (“Re-mapping the Universe: Paul and the Emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians,” *JSNT* 27 [2005] 301–22).

²⁵ As Vollenweider (“Der ‘Raub’ der Gottgleichheit” 420) observes, “Gleichheit mit Gott hat es sowohl in der jüdischen wie in der hellenistischen Welt entscheidend mit *Herrschaft* zu tun” (author’s emphasis). Status concerns are certainly at the forefront of Isaiah’s familiar rebuke of the king of Babylon: “You said in your heart, ‘. . . I will make myself like the Most High (LXX: ἕσομαι ὁμοιος τῷ ὑψίστῳ)” (Isa 14:13–14).

²⁶ Osiek, *Philippians* 71.

IV. THE CONTEXTUAL PARALLEL: ΜΟΡΦΗΝ ΔΟΥΛΟΥ

Some find in the parallel expression μορφήν δούλου (v. 7) compelling evidence to interpret μορφή θεοῦ (v. 6) in terms of nature or ontology. Jowers reasons as follows:

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 μορφήν 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 μορφήν δούλου must attach equally to μορφή θεοῦ.²⁷

I readily concur that “the parallel instances of μορφή in verses 6 and 7 must bear the same meaning.” We are not constrained, however, to read either occurrence ontologically. Consideration of the grammar of verse 7 will demonstrate why this is the case.

It is generally agreed that both participial clauses modify ἐκένωσεν by elaborating upon the manner in which Christ “emptied himself”:

ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν

μορφήν δούλου λαβὼν
ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος²⁸

The relationship between the subordinate clauses is a bit harder to discern. The preferred reading assumes that Paul intended for the second clause (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος) to explain the first (μορφήν δούλου λαβὼν). In what sense, then, did Christ take “the form of a slave”? In a relative sense—relative, that is, to his pretemporal status (v. 6). Christ took the form of a slave by becoming a human being.²⁹ That is, for Christ, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων

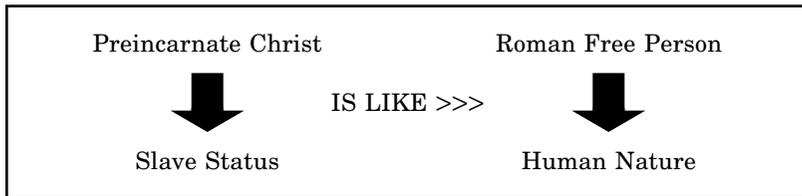
²⁷ Jowers, “Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ” 760 (see also pp. 764–65).

²⁸ Some place a full stop after λαβὼν and take the second participial clause as the beginning of a new sentence (Hofius, *Der Christushymnus* 6–8; Müller, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper* 96; Brucker, *Christushymnen* 308–9; J.-B. Edart, *L'épître aux Philippiens: Rhétorique et composition stylistique* [ÉB 45; Paris: Gabald, 2002] 129–33; Lambrecht, “The Identity of Christ Jesus” 254, n. 23). Hofius (*Der Christushymnus* 62) builds on this understanding of the grammar forcefully to argue against interpreting the expression μορφήν δούλου (v. 7b) by means of ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων in the following line (v. 7c). Hofius, however, has specifically in view Käsemann’s (“Kritische Analyse”) understanding of the relationship between 7b and 7c, according to which Christ in the incarnation became enslaved to the cosmic powers. The semantic connection between μορφήν δούλου and ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων for which I argue above is, of course, wholly unrelated to Käsemann’s, and my view does not rise or fall on the syntax of the respective clauses. For on either understanding of the grammar, one can see in the second clause (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος) a concrete explanation of the status-oriented imagery of the first (μορφήν δούλου λαβὼν), as outlined above (so, for example, Lambrecht [“The Identity of Christ Jesus” 257], who takes a different view of the grammar than I do).

²⁹ Based on the suffering Servant background in Isaiah 53 (LXX) and the reference to crucifixion in Phil 2:8, M. Bockmuehl (“The Form of God (Phil. 2.6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish

γενόμενος was tantamount to assuming slave status. P. Oakes summarizes: “Between being like God and being like a slave, there is the widest status gap imaginable by Paul’s hearers. Paul is saying that for Christ to become human meant that deep a drop in status.”³⁰

Christ did not, therefore, become “an actual servant,” to adopt Jowers’s terminology. He became an actual human being (ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος). This second participial phrase, then, is the one that should be read ontologically.³¹ Paul’s point is simply this: for the preincarnate Christ, who was equal to God, to be “born in human likeness” was equivalent to a Roman free person willingly exchanging a legal position of honor for the shameful status of a Greco-Roman slave.³²



The juxtaposition of “form of God” and “form of a slave” would have been profoundly arresting to Paul’s original audience. For as Dio Chrysostom so pointedly asserted, “[S]lavery is the most shameful and wretched of states” (*Or.* 14.1).

This understanding of μορφήν δούλου, of course, directly informs our reading of μορφή θεοῦ earlier in the passage. And the connection between the parallels now turns out to be self-defeating for a substantial interpretation of μορφή θεοῦ. For if, as I have argued, μορφήν δούλου proves to be a relative, status designation, then μορφή θεοῦ will lack an essential component, as well.

Mysticism,” *JTS* 48 [1997] 10–12) interprets μορφήν δούλου more narrowly to refer to Christ’s suffering and death: “Christ suffered the execution customarily meted out to rebellious slaves.” This, however, overlooks Paul’s own explanation of the expression, more generally, in terms of the incarnation, in the participial clause immediately following: ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος.

³⁰ P. Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 196.

³¹ *Contra* Jowers (“Meaning of ΜΟΡΦΗ” 761, 765), a non-substantial reading of μορφήν δούλου does not open the door to a docetic Christology.

³² Attempts to read δούλου here as an allusion to the prophet Isaiah’s servant figure (Isaiah 42–53), or to Christ’s enslavement to corruption or to the elemental powers (Gal 4:3) are less than convincing (Hofius, *Der Christushymnus Philipper* 61–62). What Fee (*Philippians* 63) says of the other occurrence of δούλος in Philippians (1:1) applies here in 2:7 as well: “no one would have thought it to refer to other than to those owned by, and subservient to, the master of a household.” The assessment finds confirmation in the association in the Roman mind of slavery (v. 7) and crucifixion (v. 8) as profoundly shameful, mutually referential status markers (Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor* 146–48). Finally, although the expression “servant of the Lord” can in certain contexts carry positive connotations, this does not appear to be the case in Philippians. The use of slave terminology in a patently dishonorable sense in 2:7 encourages us to interpret δούλος in Paul’s greeting (1:1) in similar terms.

Both expressions thus refer not to ontology but, rather, to Christ's social status—before (μορφή θεοῦ) and after the incarnation (μορφήν δούλου), respectively.³³

V. "GARMENTS OF DIVINE MAJESTY":
CLOTHING AND SOCIAL STATUS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

At some point while Paul was engaged in his missionary work in the East, a rather illuminating debacle erupted in the city of Rome. A trial was in process to determine whether or not a certain individual was actually a Roman citizen. Soon, however, the man's citizenship was no longer the major point of contention. His clothing was. It seems that court proceedings suddenly ground to a halt when a debate arose between the advocates about whether or not the defendant should be allowed to wear his citizen toga at the trial.

The attorney who was defending the man's claim to Roman citizenship insisted that his client be allowed the toga. The prosecuting counsel argued the contrary, contending that the man ought to be dressed in a Greek mantle in the Forum, since his citizenship was still in doubt. The emperor stepped in and resolved the dispute. Claudius, "with the idea of showing absolute impartiality, made him change his garb several times, according as he was accused or defended" (Suet. *Claud.* 15).

We chuckle at the emperor's clever solution to a seemingly intractable dilemma. Ancient readers would not have been so easily amused. For the toga functioned as the preeminent visual symbol of Roman citizenship in the ancient world.³⁴ The citizen toga had, in fact, figured prominently among a series of reforms instituted by Augustus some decades earlier. The emperor, we are informed,

desired also to revive the ancient fashion of dress, and once when he saw in an assembly a throng of men in dark cloaks (the *toga virilis* was white), he cried out indignantly, "Behold them, Romans, lords of the world, the nation clad in the toga," (sarcastically quoting Virgil, *Aen.* 1.282) and he directed the aediles never again to allow anyone to appear in the Forum or its neighbourhood except in the toga without a cloak (Suet. *Aug.* 40).

³³ One could perhaps argue that the parallel in verse 7 to ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ (v. 6) is not μορφήν δούλου but, rather, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος. The syntax between the two phrases is similar, and there is something attractive about a parallel that sees Christ "being" or "existing" (ὑπάρχων) in the form of God, and then "becoming" (γενόμενος) in the likeness of human beings. This interpretation, moreover, would seem to favor an ontological understanding of μορφή θεοῦ (v. 6), since most read ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων in terms of Christ's essential human nature.

I rather think, however, that the two occurrences of μορφή with the genitive (vv. 6, 7), along with the status-concerns of the passage and its social context, would have led Paul's readers to identify μορφήν δούλου λαβών (v. 7) as the more obviously intended parallel to ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων in the previous verse. The phrase ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος functions, in turn, most effectively as an elaboration upon the immediately preceding participial phrase (μορφήν δούλου λαβών), as discussed above.

³⁴ On the *toga virilis* see now J. A. Harrill, "Coming of Age and Putting on Christ: The *Toga Virilis* Ceremony, Its Paraenesis, and Paul's Interpretation of Baptism in Galatians," *NouT* 44 (2002) 252–77.

As Barton has recently remarked, “For the Romans, being was being seen.”³⁵ And clothing was a key aspect of one’s visual appearance where social status was concerned.

Everyone who mattered dressed according to rank. Citizens wore the toga. Senators displayed on their togas the broad purple stripe, known as the *latus clavus*. Equestrians donned a citizen toga with a narrow purple stripe, and they wore a characteristic gold ring to mark out their membership in the order. Even the lowly freedman had an article of clothing that publicly proclaimed his rank in society: the *pillius*, a close-fitting felt cap shaped like half an egg that he wore upon manumission.

So closely was the idea of visible appearance tied to social status that the Romans commonly utilized a piece of clothing as a synecdoche to refer to a whole social class. An inscription from Philippi thus boasts that a certain Gaius Julius Maximus Mucianus was “honored with the *latus clavus* by the divine (Antoninus) Pius,” meaning, of course, that the emperor elevated Gaius to membership in the senatorial order.³⁶ Accession to the equestrian order could simply be described as receiving “the honour of the gold ring” (Suet. *Galba* 14; *Iul.* 39). And the term *pillius* served as a synecdoche for the whole idea of a slave acquiring his freedom. Accordingly, when Saturninus and Sulla recruited slaves into their personal armies, they “summoned the slaves to arms showing them a cap of liberty” (Val. Max. 8.6.2).

My digression to the topic of clothing and social status in the Roman world has not been without aim. The quotation in the heading to this section is taken from a longer paraphrase of the meaning of μορφή θεοῦ in Phil 2:6, by O’Brien: “The expression does not refer simply to external appearance but pictures the preexistent Christ as clothed in garments of divine majesty and splendour.”³⁷ The idea of clothing might seem at first glance far removed from μορφή θεοῦ in Philippians 2. The following points, however, suggest that O’Brien is quite on target in his analysis of the expression:

- The basic connotation of μορφή in terms of “visible appearance”
- The connection between clothing and social status in the Roman world
- The common understanding of biblical theophanies in terms of God’s glory
- The grammar of the clause in which μορφή θεοῦ is found
- The association in biblical literature of glory, clothing, and visible appearance

I have already touched upon the semantic range of μορφή. And what has been said immediately above will have to suffice in the present connection to demonstrate that for the Romans clothing was an important symbol of rank.³⁸ I will now consider, in turn, the other three observations.

³⁵ Barton, *Roman Honor* 58.

³⁶ 240/L465. Inscriptions from Philippi are identified according to Pilhofer (*Philippi*, Band 2).

³⁷ O’Brien, *Philippians* 211.

³⁸ See Hellerman (*Reconstructing Honor* 12–19) for a more thorough treatment. J. Neyrey also discusses clothing as a mark of honor in the ancient world (“Clothing,” in *Biblical Social Values*

1. *Theophanies and the glory of God.* With Johannes Behm I find precedence for what Paul had in mind in $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ in the “concept of the Greek Bible . . . according to which the majesty of God is visibly expressed in the radiance of heavenly light.”³⁹ The OT records numerous visible manifestations of God and often describes such appearances in terms of God’s glory. Ezekiel, for example, depicts a theophany he witnessed as having “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (1:28). Isaiah narrates his memorable vision of Yahweh using $\delta\acute{o}\zeta\alpha$ terminology (Isa 6:1–3), and the author of John’s Gospel later identifies the object of Isaiah’s vision as the preincarnate Christ, asserting that Isaiah “saw his glory and spoke about him” (John 12:41). The association of “glory” with God’s visible manifestation particularly characterizes the Exodus narratives. At one point Moses promised the Israelites, “you shall see the glory of the Lord” (16:7). Soon, “the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud” (v. 10). Later Moses asked God, “Show me your glory, I pray” (33:18).⁴⁰ The *topos* is picked up again in documents from the Second Temple period. As Sirach reminds his readers, “It was Ezekiel who saw the vision of glory” (49:8). Elsewhere he rhetorically inquires, “Who could ever tire of seeing his glory?” (42:25).

The NT also uses $\delta\acute{o}\zeta\alpha$ terminology to speak of visible manifestations of God or his agents. Each of the Synoptic Gospels explicitly associates the appearance of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 with “glory”: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26; cf. Matt 24:30; Luke 21:27). Peter and his companions “saw [Jesus’] glory” during the Transfiguration (Luke 9:32). Jesus, in John 17, prays that his followers may be with him and “see” his “glory” (17:24). Stephen “saw the glory of God” (Acts 7:55). Luke used the term $\delta\acute{o}\zeta\alpha$ in Acts to describe Paul’s theophany on the Damascus road (22:11).

Given (a) that $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$ means most basically “visible appearance,” and (b) that God’s visible appearance is so widely framed in terms of his glory, it would seem self-evident that $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$, or “visible appearance of God,” in Phil 2:6 ought to be taken to refer, in some sense, to the glory of God. And this is precisely how many commentators interpret the expression.⁴¹

and *Their Meaning* [ed. B. Malina and J. Pilch; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993] 20–22; “Loss of Wealth, Loss of Family, Loss of Honor: The Cultural Context of the Original Makarisms in Q,” in *The Social World of the New Testament* [ed. J. Neyrey and E. Stewart; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008] 89).

³⁹ J. Behm (“ $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$,” in *TDNT* 4.751).

⁴⁰ The idea of “the glory of the Lord” appearing to the Israelites or to their leaders is a common theme in the Torah and later OT literature (Lev 9:6, 23; Num 14:10, 22; 16:9, 42; 20:6; Pss 97:6; 102:16; Isa 24:23; 35:2; 40:5; 60:2).

⁴¹ For example, R. B. Strimple (“Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Studies: Some Exegetical Conclusions,” *WTJ* 41 [1979] 261); Hawthorne (*Philippians* 101); Fowl (*The Story of Christ* 54; idem, “Christology and Ethics” 142); and O’Brien (*Philippians* 208). Bockmuehl seems to reject the interpretation (“The Form of God” 8, 11) but his alternative ends in much the same place: “the visible divine beauty and appearance which Christ had in his pre-incarnate state” (p. 23). Understanding $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ in terms of Christ’s glory seems to necessitate a reference to Christ’s pretemporal existence in the expression. Except for the Transfiguration it is quite clear that Christ was not

2. *Glory, clothing, visible appearance, and the grammar of Phil 2:6.* One objection to the interpretation of μορφή θεοῦ in terms of God's glory relates to the structure of the clause in which the expression is found. Some find it grammatically problematic to speak of a person "being in an appearance" (ἐν μορφῇ . . . ὑπάρχων). O'Brien counters: "The picture of the preexistent Christ clothed in the garments of divine majesty and splendour could be said to make adequate sense of the phrase."⁴² The observation has much in its favor. In Luke's gospel the same participle and preposition appear in a similar connection: οἱ ἐν ἱματισμῷ ἐνδόξῳ καὶ τρυφῇ ὑπάρχοντες (7:25). Social status and clothing are clearly in view here. Notice, as well, the δόξα terminology (ἱματισμῷ ἐνδόξῳ in the dative with ἐν, precisely paralleling the use of μορφή with ἐν and ὑπάρχων in Phil 2:6). The association of "glory" and "clothing" surfaces elsewhere in biblical literature: "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Luke 12:27; cf. Matt 6:29). See, also, Job 40:10: "Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory (LXX δόξαν) and splendor;" and note the description of the high-priest Simon in Sirach 50:11: "when he put on his glorious robe and clothed himself in perfect splendor, when he went up to the holy altar, he made the court of the sanctuary glorious" (compare Isa 59:17–19). The same connection surfaces in the Jewish Pseudepigrapha: "And the Great Glory was sitting upon it [the Throne]—as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow" (1 Enoch 14:20–22; see 62:15–16, where the elect are clothed with "garments of glory"; 2 Enoch [J] 22:8–9; T. Jacob 7:25; Ep. Aristeas 96–99).⁴³ All of this corresponds quite nicely to the association

clothed with glory (in the sense of "the majesty of God . . . visibly expressed in the radiance of heavenly light," Behm, above) during the incarnation (see John 17:5). Compare, in contrast, the reading of μορφή θεοῦ according to Adam Christology, which views the expression as synonymous with εἰκὼν θεοῦ, an interpretation that more naturally (but wrongly, in my view) sees Christ's humanity referenced here.

Common objections to the μορφή-δόξα connection—(a) that μορφή and δόξα are not synonymous, and (b) that the parallel use of μορφή in the expression μορφήν δούλου (v. 7) cannot be read in terms of δόξα—misunderstand what is being argued here and are easily refuted. See the discussions in Strimple ("Philippians 2:5–11" 261); O'Brien (*Philippians* 208); and Hellerman (*Reconstructing Honor* 132).

⁴² O'Brien, *Philippians* 209. So also Hawthorne (*Philippians* 101); T. Nagata ("Philippians 2:5–11: A Case Study in the Contextual Shaping of Early Christology" [Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1981] 209–11); Vollenweider ("Der 'Raub' der Gottgleichheit" 429).

⁴³ The translation is E. Isaac's ("1 Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [ed. J. H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1983] 1.21). C. R. A. Morray-Jones finds glory and clothing closely associated with one another in later rabbinic midrash and in the Hekhalot writings:

R. Samuel said: "The Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself in it as a garment and the splendour of His Glory shone forth from one end of the world to the other. . . . Who covereth Himself with light as with a garment" (*Gen. R.* 3.4; Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism in the Apocalyptic-Merkabah Tradition," *JJS* 43 [1992] 6).

Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, apportions some of His glory to those that fear Him. To the King Messiah He grants to be clothed in His robes (*Num. R.* 15.13; Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism" 14).

of honor, status, and public attire in the social world of Paul's Philippian audience.

A final passage ties together several themes addressed in the above discussion. In Luke's version of the Transfiguration, we encounter references to clothing and glory in a context in which visible appearance is markedly emphasized:

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the *appearance* (εἶδος) of his face changed, and his *clothes* became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They *appeared in glory* and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, *they saw his glory* and the two men who stood with him. (Luke 9:28–32; emphasis mine)

Recall, as well, that Matthew and Mark, in their parallel accounts of the Transfiguration, employ the μορφή cognate μεταμορφόω, and they do so in a non-substantial sense (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:2).⁴⁴

The function of clothing as a status symbol in the Roman world thus converges with the association of glory, clothing, and visible appearance attested in the above passages to render quite viable a status-glory-clothing interpretation of μορφή θεοῦ in Phil 2:6. In this sense, then, O'Brien's reading of the expression as referring to the pretemporal Christ "clothed in garments of divine majesty and splendour" is on the mark. I would want to qualify O'Brien's interpretation, however, as follows. Given (a) the nexus in Roman social ideology between clothing and rank; (b) the markedly Roman cultural values and social codes that characterized the relational ethos of the colony at Philippi; (c) the relatively rare uses of μορφή in terms of essence or nature in ancient literature; and (d) the interpretations of τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ (v. 6) and μορφήν δούλου (v. 7) outlined above, μορφή θεοῦ in Phil 2:6 should be understood as a signifier of social status—and the potential to exercise power that comes with such status—without any corresponding ontological component.

VI. CONCLUSION

No interpretation of μορφή θεοῦ will fully convince. Any option warranting serious consideration, however, must satisfactorily address a number of complex lexical and grammatical issues, along with the relationship of ἐν

... the garment of Him Who, crowned and shrouded in it, sits upon the Throne of His Glory (Hekhalot *Rabbati* 4.2; Morray-Jones, "Transformational Mysticism," 6).

Morray-Jones ("Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition" [Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1988]) traces the traditions associated with these texts back into first- and second-century rabbinism. On the general theme of divine garments in the OT and in the ancient Near East see T. Podella, *Das Lichtkleid JWHWs* (FAT 15; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996).

⁴⁴ Morgan cautiously offers the Transfiguration as a possible parallel to Philippians 2:6–11 ("Incarnation, Myth, and Theology" 71). Others relate our text to John 13:3–17 (Hawthorne, *Philippians* 78–79), or to the tradition of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (C. Brown, "Ernst Lohmeyer's *Kyrios Jesus*," in *Where Christology Began* 27–28).

μορφῆ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων to other terms and phrases in the near context. And then there is the social world of Philippi to consider, a factor rarely taken into account in the interpretation of Phil 2:6–11. Here I suggest that a non-substantial interpretation of μορφῆ θεοῦ in terms of rank or social status, alluding to Christ's garments of preincarnate glory, has much to commend it. The reading (1) accords well with the social environment of Roman Philippi; (2) fits nicely within the semantic range of μορφή; (3) works with the grammar of the clause in which the expression is found (ἐν μορφῆ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων); (4) harmonizes well with current scholarly consensus on the meaning of ἀραγμόν; (5) allows for a cogent understanding of the related phrase, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ; and, finally, (6) functions properly in antithetical parallelism with μορφῆν δούλου, which is decidedly non-substantial in meaning. The combination of these six observations persuasively supports reading μορφῆ θεοῦ in terms of social status, *sans* ontology.