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'An introduction to the New Testament

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## CHAPTER 20

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### LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

In some ways this is the most attractive Pauline letter, reflecting more patently than any other the warm affection of the apostle for his brothers and sisters in Christ. Indeed, Phil has been classified an example of the rhetoric of friendship. It contains one of the best-known and loved NT descriptions of the graciousness of Christ: one who emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, even unto death on a cross. Nevertheless, Phil is plagued by much-debated difficulties. We cannot be certain where Paul was when he wrote it and hence the date of its composition. Moreover, we are uncertain of its unity, for some would divide the present document into two or three originally distinct letters. But let us discuss the letter as it now stands before turning to such debates. After the *Background* and the *General Analysis* of Phil, subsections will be devoted to: *Hymns and the Christological hymn of 2:5–11*, *From where and when*, *Unity*, *Issues for reflection*, and *Bibliography*.

#### The Background

As we recalled on p. 456 above, Paul had crossed over by sea with Silas and Timothy from the Province of Asia (Asia Minor or present-day Turkey) to Macedonia (Europe, present-day northern Greece) in AD 50–51. Passing the mountainous island of Samothrace, they landed at the port of Neapolis, where the great Roman highway across Macedonia, the Via Egnatia, had an access coming down to the sea. It is dubious that such a long highway was always well maintained in these early imperial times, so that Philippi, astride the Egnatia some ten miles inland, depended heavily on commerce coming up the short access road from the Mediterranean. This site, to which the missionaries immediately went, was a major Roman city, where a century before (42 BC) Mark Antony and Octavian (Augustus) had defeated Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, and had settled the veterans from the victorious armies.<sup>1</sup> Here Paul proclaimed the gospel and founded his

<sup>1</sup>The earlier history of this city (brought under Macedonian dominion in 356 BC by Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, and named after him; then brought under Roman control in 168 BC) is not relevant for our purposes. Acts 16:12 correctly describes it as a *kolonia* (a settlement of retired Roman troops). Latin was the official language, but commercial contacts with neighboring cities

### Summary of Basic Information

**DATE:** Ca. 56 if from Ephesus. (Or 61–63 from Rome, or 58–60 from Caesarea.)

**TO:** The Christians at Philippi, a Roman colony (Acts 17:12) where army veterans were allotted property after battles in the civil wars (42 BC), and like Thessalonica (farther west) an important commercial city on the Via Egnatia. Evangelized by Paul ca. AD 50 on his "Second Missionary Journey" (see Table 6 in Chapter 16 above for Revisionist Chronology).

**AUTHENTICITY:** Not seriously disputed.

**UNITY:** Scholarship about evenly divided: That two or three letters have been combined to make up Philippians is widely suggested, but a respectable case can be made for unity.

**INTEGRITY:** Today no major theory of interpolations. In the past, proposed interpolations for theological reasons: "bishops and deacons" (1:1), or the christological hymn (2:6–11).

**FORMAL DIVISION** (of existing, unified letter):

A. Opening Formula: 1:1–2

B. Thanksgiving: 1:3–11

C. Body: 1:12–4:20: Mixture of Paul's prison situation; exhortations, warning against false teachers, gratitude to the Philippians

D. Concluding Formula: 4:21–23.

**DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS:**

1:1–11: Address/greeting and Thanksgiving

1:12–26: Paul's situation in prison and attitude toward death

1:27–2:16: Exhortation based on example of Christ (christological hymn)

2:17–3:1a: Paul's interest in the Philippians and planned missions to them

3:1b–4:1: Warning against false teachers; Paul's own behavior (a separate letter?)

4:2–9: Exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche: unity, joy, higher things

4:10–20: Paul's situation and the Philippians' generous gifts

4:21–23: Concluding greeting, blessing.

first church in Europe (Acts 16:11–15; Phil 4:15). A tribute to his planting is paid almost a century later by Polycarp, who (*Philippians* 1:2) speaks of the firmly rooted faith of the Philippians, famous in years past and still flourishing.

Reading Acts 16 one gets the impression of a relatively brief stay and some success among Jews and Gentiles, despite civic harassment. At the beginning (16:13–15) by a stream outside the city gate, Lydia, a merchant woman from Thyatira who sold purple goods and who was attracted to Juda-

meant that Greek was also spoken. Philippi was administered under *ius italicum*, or Roman law applicable within Italy. That may explain why in Acts 16:38–39, when the magistrates find out that they have been maltreating Roman citizens (Paul and Silas), they apologize. Acts 16:12 also describes Philippi as a "first/leading city of the district of Macedonia," but it was not the capital city of either this district of Macedonia or the province (respectively, Amphipolis and Thessalonica, mentioned in Acts 17:1).

ism ("a worshiper of God"), was baptized with her household and offered her house for Paul to stay.<sup>2</sup> This story seems to reflect accurately social realities in Philippi, and especially the prominent position played by women. Some confirmation may be supplied in Phil 4:2 by Paul's mentioning two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who are now bickering but who had been his evangelistic co-workers there. Their names and those of Epaphroditus and Clement in 2:25; 4:3 suggest that there was a high percentage of Gentiles among the Philippian Christians.

More conversions at Philippi are recorded in Acts 16:16–40. The fact that Paul had driven out the spirit from a fortune-telling slave girl caused the owners to haul him and Silas before the local magistrates as troublesome Jews. No wonder that Paul described his time at Philippi as one "when we suffered and were shamefully treated" (I Thess 2:2). Yet, although they had been stripped, beaten, and imprisoned, when an earthquake jarred open the prison doors, Paul and Silas refused to escape—a gesture that led to the conversion of the jailer and his household. Eventually the magistrates apologized for mishandling Roman citizens but asked them to depart, and so they set out west along the Via Egnatia for Thessalonica.<sup>3</sup> With that background, let us look at this letter to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with bishops and deacons" (1:1).

### General Analysis of the Message

Although my treatment of most of the Pauline letters moves sequentially, following the traditional letter format,<sup>4</sup> here as with I Thess, because Paul's thought shifts back and forth, I suggest that readers go through the letter quickly to get a surface impression of the contents, and then turn to this *Analysis* that highlights the main issues.

Those converted at Philippi by Paul entered into a unique partnership with

<sup>2</sup>Archaeological evidence (V. Abrahamsen, BA 51 [1988], 46–56) of native Thracian and Eastern cults *outside* the Roman city has led to the speculation that Jews also worshiped there, whence the presence outside the gate of both Lydia and Paul. Thyatira was in Lydia, and slaves were sometimes named after their homeland. Since wealthy people (especially women of a household) bought purple, Lydia would have had good contacts for Paul in Philippi.

<sup>3</sup>Acts 17:1. Had Paul been in Philippi again between this first visit and the time he wrote Phil? If he wrote it from Ephesus, we have no evidence that he was at Philippi again *before* he came to Ephesus to spend three years there (54–56); but he may have visited Macedonia and Philippi during that stay (Chapter 23 below, n. 3). If Paul wrote Phil from Caesarea or Rome (58–60 or 61–63), he did go to Macedonia *after* his Ephesus stay on the way to Corinth (*ca.* 57: Acts 19:21; 20:1; I Cor 16:5; II Cor 2:13; 7:5) and then again (specifically to Philippi) after he was in Corinth, on his way to Caesarea and Jerusalem (*ca.* 58: Acts 20:3,6; Rom 15:25–26?).

<sup>4</sup>In addition to the divisions of Phil suggested on the Summary Page, a chiasmic arrangement is proposed by A. B. Luter and M. V. Lee, NTS 41 (1995), 89–101, where the prologue in 1:3–11 is matched by the epilogue in 4:10–20; 1:12–26 by 4:6–9, etc.

him (1:5) that lasted from the moment he left for Thessalonica (to which they sent gifts several times: Phil 4:15–16; see also II Cor 11:9) until this very moment when he was writing from prison.<sup>5</sup> Their sending Epaphroditus to Paul has been a new attestation of this fidelity; and now, because of concern over that valuable co-worker's health, Paul has sent him back (4:18; 2:25–26). A strong bond of friendship colors this letter that expresses Paul's gratitude and keeps the Philippians informed; indeed the human attraction of Paul the man is revealed in their loyalty. One cannot dismiss simply as letter-form his emotional words to the Philippians, written in a context that had brought him face to face with the possibility of his own death: "I hold you in my heart" (1:7); "With God as my witness, I yearn for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:8); "My beloved and longed-for brothers [and sisters], my joy and my crown" (4:1). Besides the strong attestation of gratitude and friendship, which may be considered the main motivation for the letter, there are important indications about Paul's outlook from prison and the situation at Philippi that need to be considered.

**PAUL'S OUTLOOK FROM PRISON:** The letter reflects thoughts forced on Paul by his imprisonment for preaching the gospel. *First*, he is not despondent despite what he is suffering. His imprisonment, although made difficult by the legal charge and the guards, advances the gospel since clearly he is suffering for Christ (1:12–13; 3:8); and others have been emboldened by his example to preach without fear (1:14). Unfortunately some are doing that in a spirit of rivalry in order to outdo Paul (1:15),<sup>6</sup> and he shows contempt for such competitiveness both in Phil 1:18 and in the roughly contemporaneous I Cor 1:13; 3:5–9. The preachers do not matter; the only thing that matters is that Christ be preached.

*Second*, reflection on death is brought on by Paul's current situation, as witnessed both in Phil and the Corinthian correspondence. (It contributes to discussions on pp. 437–38 above by making us wonder to what extent Paul's theology on basic issues developed in the course of time.) Earlier, in I Thess 4:17, Paul used the language of: "We who are alive" at the coming of Christ. If that is not just an editorial "we," Paul expected to survive till the parousia. But in Phil 1:20–26 he wrestles with the possibility of dying

<sup>5</sup>Phil 1:7,13,17; 4:10. Throughout I shall accept the hypothesis that Paul wrote Phil at Ephesus *ca.* 56; in the other hypotheses (Caesarea [58–60], Rome [61–63]) the support of the Philippians for Paul had lasted even longer—as much as ten years! Paul supported himself rather than beg money of members of a community while he was working among them; but seemingly, once he had moved on, he would accept money sent him by way of support for continuing his ministry elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup>Rivalry among preachers or at least among their adherents seems to have been common in these early communities. According to I Cor 1:11–12 groups at Corinth were formed around Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (Peter). Acts 18:24–28 reports that just before Paul came to Ephesus for his three-year stay (54–56), Apollos had been there (and then had gone on to Corinth: 19:1).

(also II Cor 5:1–10), trying to decide whether the immediate access to Christ provided by death is better than the continued ministry of proclaiming Christ. In Phil 3:10–11 Paul speaks of sharing Christ's suffering "that somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead"—is he contemplating martyrdom?

**THE SITUATION AT PHILIPPI:** Paul wants the Philippian Christians to be blameless, shining as lights amid a crooked and perverse generation and holding fast to the word of life, so that he will know that he has not run in vain (Phil 2:14–16). Paul wishes to hear that they stand firm in one spirit, striving with one mind for the faith of the gospel—a *koinōnia* of the Spirit (1:27; 2:1). Yet there are some who are troubling the Philippian church. How many groups does Paul have in mind?<sup>8</sup> At least three distinct attitudes are reprimanded in the text.

*First*, there is internal dissension at Philippi even among those, like Euodia and Syntyche, who had labored side by side with Paul (4:2–3).<sup>9</sup> The cause of the dissension is not clear, but given human nature it probably reflected conceit and a lack of humility which Paul condemns (see 2:2–4). Indeed, it is against conceit and pushing one's own interest that Paul holds up Christ as an example of self-giving service in the christological hymn of 2:5–11 (subsection below).

*Second*, apart from the squabbling adherents who had worked with Paul, there is an external opposition to the Philippian Christians that causes them to suffer (1:28–29). Seemingly this continues the type of harassment to which Paul himself was subjected when he first came there and which he has also encountered at Ephesus (1:30; Acts 19:23–20:1), namely, people complaining about the strange teaching of the Christians because it does not acknowledge the gods, and appealing to the local authorities to arrest or expel them. Nothing can be done about such injustice, but God will overcome.

*Third*, there are the workers of evil (3:2–3) whom Paul calls dogs,<sup>10</sup> and whom the Philippians should look out for. They mutilate the flesh, seemingly

<sup>7</sup>R. E. Otto, CBQ 57 (1995), 324–40.

<sup>8</sup>As many as eighteen different analyses of the adversaries have been proposed (see Gunther, *St. Paul's 2*). Some of the multiplication is unnecessary. Those who preach Christ out of envy of Paul (1:15–18) may be at the place of his imprisonment, not at Philippi.

<sup>9</sup>Paul asks someone ("My true *syzyge*") to intervene in the dispute; it is not clear whether that means "my true yokefellow" or "my true *Syzygos*." Is this the "we companion" of Acts 16:10–16 who came with Paul to Philippi in 50–51 and seemingly stayed there until 58 (20:6)? See p. 325 above.

<sup>10</sup>Paul's use could simply reflect an epithet familiar to Jews (Isa 56:10–11; Matt 7:6; Mark 7:27). Some, however, see here a reference to Cynic preachers since the name "Cynic" (*Kynikos*) was pejoratively derived from *kyōn*, *kynos*, "dog," supposedly reflecting the disgusting public behavior (urinating and masturbating) associated polemically with them. Yet the Philippian context does not point to such behavior.

by circumcision; and believers in Jesus who worship in the spirit should put no faith in such emphasis on the flesh. Paul can refute these adversaries by describing his own impeccable Jewish credentials—even though he counts all that as loss when compared to the supreme gain of knowing Christ Jesus the Lord (3:4–11). We are not far here from Paul's attack in the roughly contemporaneous Gal on those who insisted on circumcision, namely, Christian Jews. Some think that the Phil passage is a general warning in case such people show up; for, if they were already at work in Philippi, Paul would have devoted more of the letter to them. Or else they may be just beginning to appear in small numbers at Philippi, whereas in Galatia they were having great success.<sup>11</sup>

What complicates the further diagnosis of this third group of adversaries is the tendency of scholars to interpret other parts of chap. 3 as referring to them. Before we enter into details, readers need to be cautioned about such a use of chap. 3 to reconstruct a historical situation,<sup>12</sup> since it shows a certain thematic parallelism to the christological message of chap. 2. (That parallelism also creates doubt that chap. 3 was originally a separate letter, as many scholars maintain; see below.) Just as Paul asked the Philippians to have the mind of Christ (2:5), he can say to them, "Join in imitating me" (3:17). Similar to Christ who was in the image of God and yet emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, Paul, who once had confidence in his fleshly origins as a circumcised Israelite and blameless Pharisee, counted all that as rubbish for the sake of Christ (3:4–9). And just as Christ was elevated, so also Paul, who emphasizes that he is not already perfect, presses upward to God in Christ Jesus (3:12–14). If one accepts such parallelism, how much can be diagnosed from chap. 3 about adversaries?

Is Paul's acknowledgment of imperfection sufficient warrant for theorizing that the adversaries had gnostic leanings, claiming to be perfect and professing a radically realized eschatology in which Christ had already come?<sup>13</sup> In 3:18–19 Paul reiterates a warning given in times past about those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ, making the belly their god, glorying in their shame, and setting their mind on earthly things (implicitly unlike

<sup>11</sup>Somewhat combining what I have designated as the second and third adversaries, M. Tellbe, JSNT 55 (1994), 97–121, argues that the Judaizers were trying to persuade the Philippian Christians that if they were circumcised, they would be tolerated by the Romans as Jews.

<sup>12</sup>D. J. Doughty, NTS 41 (1995), 102–22, argues that 3:2–21 is not addressing a particular community situation involving real opponents; rather it is a deuteroPauline characterization of persons outside the community.

<sup>13</sup>This thesis is related to the detection of gnostic background in the christological hymn of 2:5–11, to the use of *gnōsis* in 3:8, and to the designation "enemies of the cross" in 3:18 (in the sense of denying that Jesus died on the cross and therefore rejecting the resurrection).

Christ, who has been exalted to heavenly things: 2:9–11). Are those people the same as the Judaizing workers of evil of 3:2–3, now described as stressing Mosaic food laws and glorying in the circumcised male organ?<sup>14</sup> (Yet the warning in 3:2–3 seems to be against a new, not a past danger.) Or is this a more general condemnation of libertines based on the inevitabilities of unfettered human desires—a common and not necessarily specific charge? Or even a condemnation of libertines in Ephesus from where he is writing and where he struggled with “wild beasts” (I Cor 15:32). Our inability to answer those questions about 3:12 and 3:18–19 cautions against complicating the clearer condemnation in 3:2–3 of adversaries who would try to put emphasis on circumcision and confuse the Philippians. However, since most of what Paul says about himself and his outlook in chap. 3 would have its value no matter who and how distinct the adversaries were, and the description of those adversaries affects relatively few verses, a decision about them is not essential to reading Phil intelligently.

### Hymns in NT Letters and the Christological Hymn of 2:5–11

**HYMNS IN NT LETTERS.** Although there are references to Christians singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,”<sup>15</sup> the NT does not contain a collected book of hymns similar to the OT Book of Psalms, the DSS *Hodayot* (1QH), or the (Pharisees’) *Psalms of Solomon*. Rather 1st-century Christian canticles and hymns are incorporated into larger writings of another genre, e.g., a gospel, letter, apocalyptic vision. (Compare I Macc 4:30–33; II Macc 1:24–29.) Sometimes the NT hymn or song is clearly designated, as in the heavenly singing of Rev 4:8,10–11; 5:9. The canticles of the Lucan infancy narratives, while not designated as songs, are set off from the surrounding text as oracles or praise (p. 232 above). The Johannine Prologue by its very situation at the beginning of the Gospel stands apart.

A greater problem is presented by the proposal that there are hymns woven into the heart of letters and detectable only by scholarly investigation. Most often nothing in the context states that a hymn is being introduced and quoted, although occasionally the transition to the incorporated hymn

<sup>14</sup>H. Koester, NTS 8 (1961–62), 317–32, responds affirmatively: Christian missionaries of Jewish origin preaching perfection based on the Law and Jewish practices—a perfection they had achieved.

<sup>15</sup>Col 3:16; Eph 5:19; also Acts 16:25; Heb 2:12; I Cor 14:15,26; Jas 5:13. “Psalm” is a Christian composition, evidently thought comparable to OT psalms. The letter of Pliny to Trajan (10.96–97), ca. 110, says that Christians met before dawn on a stated day and sang in alternation (antiphonally?) “a hymn to Christ as a God.” The earliest preserved Christian hymn collection may be the *Odes of Solomon*, a Jewish Christian collection in Syriac of the 2d century. The earliest preserved musically annotated Christian hymn seems to be Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786 of the early 3d century.

is awkward. Among the criteria for detecting a hymn the following have been suggested:<sup>16</sup>

(a) Worship milieu, e.g., a proposed baptismal setting for Eph 5:14; and the hymns of I Peter.

(b) Introductory formulae, e.g., "It is said" in Eph 5:14; "We confess" in I Tim 3:16; or in the case of christological hymns, a clause introduced by a relative pronoun, "The one who . . ." (Phil 2:6; Col 1:15; I Tim 4:16), extended by causal connectives.

(c) Rhythmic style, parallel patterns, lines or strophes of equal length, e.g., the series of six aorist passive verbs in I Tim 3:16; the parallel descriptions of God's Son in Col 1:15–16 and 1:18b–19. This is not rhyming poetry; indeed some would argue for prose hymns.

(d) Vocabulary different from that customarily used by the epistolary author—only applicable if the author did not compose the hymn. Similarly a distinctive syntax is often found, e.g., avoiding conjunctions (thus, parataxis).

(e) Not a criterion but often characteristic of the hymns is a high christology, e.g., the description of the Word as God in John 1:1; or of the Son as the one in, for, and through whom all things were created (Col 1:16); or of Christ Jesus as one given the name above every other name (Phil 2:9). Among the themes prominent in the christology are creation, the struggle against evil leading to restoration, and Jesus' death leading to resurrection (exaltation, enthronement). Ps 110:1, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand,'" is a motif in a number of hymns (Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20–22; I Pet 3:22), probably on the principle that OT psalms could be seen as addressed to Christ (Heb 1:5,8,13). Some of the hymns addressed to Christ are similar to hymns to God.<sup>17</sup> Col 3:16 relates psalms and hymns to teaching the word of Christ, and so they became early vehicles of a christological gospel. Hengel ("Hymns" 192) claims, "The hymn to Christ . . . is as old as the community itself."

(f) Another characteristic is the free redactional addition of explanatory clauses or phrases to traditional hymns to apply them more directly to the author's theme (see n. 20 and 21 below; also n. 9 in Chapter 27).

The criteria are not easy to apply, and as a result the detection of hymns is an inexact "science." That will be illustrated in debates to be reported

<sup>16</sup>The borderline between hymns and confessional formulae is imprecise. For detecting hymns a pioneering work in German was E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913). Amid a large bibliography, see J. T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns* (SNTSMS 15; Cambridge Univ., 1971); E. Stauffer, *NT Theology*, 338–39; M. Hengel, "Hymns and Christology," *Studia Biblica 1978* (JSNTSup 3; Sheffield: Academic, 1980), 173–97; E. Krentz, *BR 40* (1995), 50–97.

<sup>17</sup>Compare Eph 5:19 ("to the Lord") to Col 3:16 ("to God"); Rev 4:8–11 (to "the Lord God Almighty") to 5:9 (a new song to the Lamb).

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about the individual hymns—debates as to where they end or how they are to be divided or which lines are original. Moreover, the line of demarcation between hymns and confessional formulae (e.g., I Cor 15:3-8) or doxologies (e.g., I Tim 6:15-16) is not clear. The following is a list of hymns often detected by scholars in NT letters (scholarly estimates run from five to thirty); it does not claim to be complete, and those marked with an asterisk would be the most agreed on:

Phil 2:6-11*	Col 1:15-20*	Heb 1:3
I Cor 13	Eph 1:3-14*	I Pet 1:3-5
Rom 3:24-26	Eph 1:20-23	I Pet 1:18-21
Rom 6:1-11	Eph 2:14-18(22)	I Pet 2:21-25
Rom 8:31-39	Eph 5:14*	I Pet 3:18-22
Rom 11:33-36	Titus 3:4-7	
	I Tim 3:16*	
	II Tim 2:11-13*	

Various backgrounds have been suggested for the formation of such hymns. Among the suggested Pagan parallels are the Orphic Hymns (5th-4th centuries BC), the Isis Hymn of Cyme (2d century BC),<sup>18</sup> and the Mithras Liturgy (pp. 87-88 above). Jewish background is supplied by the personified Wisdom poems of the OT (e.g., Prov 1:20-33; 8-9; Sirach 24; Wisdom 7:22ff.; Baruch 3:9ff.) where before the creation of the world Wisdom is created by or proceeds from God, then comes down to dwell among human beings, and offers them the food and drink of the knowledge of God. This portrait of Wisdom was a major element in shaping NT christology (BINTC 205-10).

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL HYMN OF 2:5-11. This description of Christ as a servant to be imitated is the most famous passage in Phil (and indeed among the most memorable lines ever penned by the apostle). There is an enormous literature devoted to it,<sup>19</sup> and a detailed consideration lies beyond the possibilities of this introductory book. Yet these points are worth mentioning by way of acquainting readers with the issues:

- Most think that Paul wrote but did not create these lines; they are probably a prePauline hymn that the Philippians knew and that Paul may have taught them at the time of his first visit.
- The structure of the hymn is debated, e.g., six strophes of three lines each (E.

<sup>18</sup>R. MacMullen and E. N. Lane, *Paganism and Christianity 100-425 C.E.* (Minneapolis: A/F, 1992), includes a number of ancient hymns.

<sup>19</sup>For bibliography see R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); also N. T. Wright, *JTS NS 37* (1986), 321-52.

Lohmeyer),<sup>20</sup> or three strophes of four lines each (J. Jeremias).<sup>21</sup> In its theological flow, the hymn is bipartite, with the theme of lowliness/abasement in 2:6–8 and that of exaltation in 2:9–11.

- Proposals about the background of the hymn (exclusive or in combination) include: gnostic reflections on the Primal Man; the Poimandres tractate in the Hermetic literature (p. 85 above); the Genesis story of Adam and speculations about a second Adam; the Suffering Servant imagery in deuterоIsaiah;<sup>22</sup> the personified figure of divine Wisdom in postexilic Judaism. A relation to the OT is clear; other proposed references are not.
- Also debated is whether the hymn was originally composed in Greek, probably with its origin in the mission that evangelized Greek-speaking Jews, or in Aramaic with its origin in the Palestinian missionary enterprise. A plausible case can be made for the latter and for the possibility that Paul learned the hymn in the late 30s in the first years after his conversion.<sup>23</sup>
- Dispute about the precise focus of the christology is centered on 2:6–7: Christ Jesus “who being in the form [*morphē*] of God, did not think being equal to God a *harpagmon* [something to be clung to or grasped at], but emptied himself having taken the form of a servant, having become [or been born] in a human form.” Is “being in the form of God” the same as being equal to God and thus being uncreated (as in the Johannine Prologue: “The Word was God”), or does it mean being in the image/likeness of God (as in Gen 1:27: “God created Adam in His image”) and thus lower than being equal to God? Correspondingly, was Christ Jesus already equal to God but did not *cling* to that, or was he offered the possibility to become equal to God and did not *grasp* at it (as did Adam when tempted by the serpent in Gen 3:5: “You will be like gods”)? Is the movement in the hymn from Christ’s being first in the form of God (i.e., equal to God) to subsequently becoming human and thus taking on the form of a servant? Or does the hymn start with Christ’s simultaneously being both in the form (image) of God (which is not the same as equal to God) and human in the form of a servant, and does the movement consist in accepting the form of a servant rather than grasping at becoming equal to God? In other words does the hymn posit an incarnation of a divine figure as does the Johannine Prologue, or is there a play on two Adam-figures (i.e., human archetypal models): the Adam of Gen who was in the image of God but, by ambitiously trying to go higher, went lower through his sin; and Christ

<sup>20</sup>Strophes matching verses thus: A = v. 6; B = 7a–c; C = 7d–8b; D = 9; E = 10; F = 11. “Even death on a cross” in v. 8c is judged to be Paul’s addition to the original hymn. (For the subdivision of verses indicated by letters of the alphabet [7a,b,c,d], see p. xxxii above.)

<sup>21</sup>Thus: A = 6–7b; B = 7c–8b; C = 9–11. Besides “even death on a cross” (8c), “of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth” in 10c and “to the glory of God the Father” in 11c are judged to be Paul’s additions.

<sup>22</sup>Listing six proposals, D. Seeley, JHC 1 (1994), 49–72, argues that the hymn contrasts the Isaian servant and the Greco-Roman ruler worshiped as divine and all-powerful.

<sup>23</sup>See J. A. Fitzmyer, CBQ 50 (1988), 470–83; also his summary in NJBC 82.48–54.

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who was in the image of God but, by humbly choosing to go lower, ultimately was exalted by being given the divine name (2:9–11)?<sup>24</sup> If the hymn is incarnational and was phrased in Aramaic in the 30s, the highest type of NT christology was articulated early indeed.

- Although in itself the hymn is christological, the paraenetic context is soteriological,<sup>25</sup> i.e., it exhorts the addressees for their own salvation to follow the exalted Christ. Rather than looking out for their own interests and seeking to better themselves (2:3–4), the Philippians are to have the mind of a Christ who showed that the way to God is not by grasping at a higher place on the ladder (“upward mobility”) but by becoming humbly obedient to God, even unto death on a cross.

### From Where and When?

We glean from Phil itself the following items indicative of Paul’s situation when he wrote the letter:<sup>26</sup>

- (a\*) He was in prison (1:7,13,17).
- (b) Where he was imprisoned there were members of the praetorian guard (1:13), as well as Christians among “Caesar’s household” (4:22).<sup>27</sup>
- (c) Paul mentions the possibility that he might die (1:19–21; 2:17): Imminently as condemnation culminating his imprisonment? Or as a missionary’s always-possible fate?
- (d\*) Yet he also hopes to be delivered (1:24–25; 2:25).
- (e\*) Timothy was with Paul (1:1; 2:19–23).
- (f) Christians with different motives in this area, some envious of Paul, have been emboldened to speak the word of God (1:14–18).
- (g) There have been frequent contacts between Paul and Philippi through messengers back and forth:
  1. News reached the Philippians of Paul’s imprisonment;

<sup>24</sup>See BINTC 133–35. Incarnational interpretations in L. D. Hurst, NTS 32 (1986), 449–57; C. A. Wanamaker, NTS 33 (1987), 179–93; nonincarnational in J. Murphy-O’Connor, RB 83 (1976), 25–50; G. E. Howard, CBQ 40 (1978), 368–87; see also J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (2d ed.; London: SCM, 1989).

<sup>25</sup>Unfortunately this hymn is often studied in itself without reference to its place in the letter’s flow of thought. For that context see Kurz, “Kenotic”; and M. D. Hooker in *Jesus und Paulus*, eds. E. E. Ellis and E. Grässer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 151–64.

<sup>26</sup>Asterisks indicate features in Phil that are also true in whole or part of Paul’s situation when he wrote Phlm (Chapter 21 below). As for Philippians, if it consists of what were originally two or three letters (see next subsection), one could have been written from one place, and another from another place. (For example, chap. 3 does not mention imprisonment.) But that is too uncontrollable a possibility for our purposes here.

<sup>27</sup>I.e., officials, servants, and slaves in the emperor’s administration and/or service, both in Rome and throughout the Empire.

2. They sent Epaphroditus with a gift (4:15);<sup>28</sup> but staying with Paul, he became ill, even to the point of death (2:26,30);
3. News reached the Philippians of Epaphroditus' illness;
4. Epaphroditus heard that this news distressed the Philippians;
5. Paul had sent or is now sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi (2:25–30);
6. Paul hopes to send Timothy soon (2:19–23), and indeed to come himself (2:24).

What sites in Paul's known career would fit these details?

CAESAREA (58–60)—first proposed in 1799. After Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, Acts 23:33–26:32 describes how Paul was taken to Caesarea to be tried before Felix, then imprisoned, and left there for two years until the new procurator, Festus, examined him and sent him to Rome. Details *a*, *b*, *c*, *d* above could fit this situation, particularly *ca.* 60, when Felix arrived and gave Paul hope for release. As for *e*, Timothy set out for Jerusalem with Paul and went as far as Troas (20:4–5), but we never hear of him again in Acts. Are we to think that he went on to Jerusalem and Caesarea and remained with Paul for the two years? And, in terms of *f*, did Paul's imprisonment spark rival evangelistic activity among the Christians of Caesarea of whom we heard earlier in Acts 21:8–14, even though all of them seemed favorable to Paul? The greatest difficulty concerns *g*. Philippi is some 900–1,000 miles from Caesarea by the sea route (which would not always be feasible) and well over 1,000 miles by the very difficult land route. Are all those journeys back and forth from Caesarea to Philippi plausible?<sup>29</sup>

ROME (61–63).<sup>30</sup> Acts 28:16,30 reports that Paul, having been brought to Rome, remained under a type of house arrest (by himself, with a soldier to guard him) for two years at his own expense, and was allowed to preach unhindered.<sup>31</sup> As with Caesarea, details *a*, *b*, *c*, *d* could fit Rome; indeed *b*

<sup>28</sup>One could place Paul's imprisonment after the arrival of Epaphroditus, in which case the Philippians would have been sending the gift simply to help Paul's missionary activity (like the gifts sent to him at Thessalonica [Phil 4:16]).

<sup>29</sup>Paul's original plan was to go from Jerusalem to Rome and Spain (Rom 15:24–28); and if he had been released from Caesarea, Philippi would have been on that route provided he wanted to visit churches he had evangelized on the coast of Asia Minor and in Greece. Yet we should remember that the author of Acts, who is our only source for the Caesarea imprisonment, portrays Paul as having no hope he would ever get back to much of that Asia Minor area (Acts 20:25,38).

<sup>30</sup>This was already suggested in the Marcionite Prologue (*ca.* 200?) and remained traditional into modern times, in part because Phil was associated with Col, Eph, and Phlm as four captivity or prison epistles (and Timothy was a co-sender of both Phil and Col). In that hypothesis Col and Eph best fitted the last part of Paul's career (the 60s). If deemed slightly earlier than the others, Phil was dated at the beginning of the Roman detention.

<sup>31</sup>C. S. Wansink, *Imprisonment for the Gospel: The Apostle Paul and Roman Prisons* (JSNTSup 130; Sheffield: Academic, 1996). Perhaps Paul's imprisonment in Rome is attested by *I Clement* 5:7, written from the church of Rome *ca.* AD 96: "Having come to the limits of the West [see Acts 1:8],

could fit Rome better. As for *e*, there is no evidence in Acts that Timothy was with Paul in Rome in 61–63, and the time distance from the last mention of him (at Troas) is greater; but *f* is more easily fulfilled in Rome, since in Acts Paul's own preaching is mentioned and we know from Rom 14 and 16:17–18 that Christians there were of different views.<sup>32</sup> Again the greatest difficulty concerns *g*. From Rome to Philippi the land route southeast along the Via Appia to Brundisium, across the Adriatic Sea by ship to Macedonia, and along the Via Egnatia to Philippi would be somewhat more than 700 miles; and a sea voyage along the west coast of Italy, across the Adriatic, with disembarkation and reembarkation at the Corinthian isthmus, and up the east coast of Greece (a route that might have been followed if the emissaries wanted to visit the Pauline church at Corinth) would be over 900 miles. Although the distances are shorter than those in the Caesarea hypothesis, they are still a formidable obstacle to the frequency of the journeys necessary to explain the evidence of the letter.

EPHESUS (54–56)—proposed at the beginning of the 20th century. Here *a* is a problem, for we have no specific evidence that Paul was in prison at Ephesus. Yet during his three-year stay there, Acts 19:23–41 mentions an uproar in which Paul's companions were hauled before the magistrates, and Paul himself speaks of having fought "wild beasts"<sup>33</sup> at Ephesus in a context that threatened his life (I Cor 15:32) and of having almost received a sentence of death while in Asia (II Cor 1:8–10). Also in II Cor 6:5; 11:23 (written before he was imprisoned at Caesarea and in Rome) Paul speaks of having already undergone many imprisonments.<sup>34</sup> Thus imprisonment at Ephesus is a distinct possibility, and then *b*, *c*, *d*, and *f* would offer no difficulty.<sup>35</sup> As for *e*, Timothy was definitely with Paul at Ephesus (I Cor 4:17; 16:10; Acts 19:22); also the details in *g* fit Ephesus better than either Caesarea or Rome. From Ephesus to Philippi a direct sea journey, or one by land to Troas and then by sea, would be only about 400 miles and take seven to

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and having testified before rulers, he thus departed this world and was taken up to the holy place [i.e., heaven]."

<sup>32</sup>Phil 1:15 speaks of some preaching out of *phthonos* ("envy, zeal"); *I Clement* 5:2 reports that because of *phthonos* the greatest pillars (of the church: Peter and Paul) were persecuted to death (at Rome).

<sup>33</sup>A. J. Malherbe, *JBL* 87 (1968), 71–80, sees "beasts" as Paul's use of traditional polemic language for opponents. Since, however, Ignatius, *Romans* 5:1, uses this language to describe his own being taken under the custody of guards from Syria to Rome, could Paul be going beyond fierce opponents and referring more specifically to those who imprisoned him at Ephesus?

<sup>34</sup>*Clement* 5:6 has the tradition that Paul was seven times in bonds. Later, as he journeyed to Jerusalem in 58, was part of the reason for avoiding Ephesus (Acts 20:16–17) that he had been in prison there and might be arrested again?

<sup>35</sup>As for *b*, Ephesus was the most important city of the Roman province of Asia and the site of the proconsular headquarters, so that there would have been a major Roman presence there including a *praetorium*. "Caesar's household" (n. 27 above) could refer to the staff of the imperial bank in Asia.

nine days. Moreover, the references to Timothy just cited show that Paul did send emissaries into Macedonia when he was at Ephesus. An objection to the Ephesus theory is that I Cor, sent from there, mentions a collection to be taken up for the Jerusalem church throughout the whole Pauline missionary territory, and Phil does not.<sup>36</sup> But neither does Gal<sup>37</sup> (or Phlm), plausibly written at Ephesus, even though the collection would be taken in the Galatian area (I Cor 16:1). Paul's stay at Ephesus and subsequent travel to Corinth (whence he would go to Jerusalem) covered a time span of four years. Gathering and bringing a collection to Jerusalem would not have been a matter of urgency throughout the entire period, especially if during that time he was in prison at Ephesus and might die (obviously without getting to Jerusalem). It would have become more urgent toward the end of the Ephesus period when Paul was released from prison and could plan his travels, and then again, when he had left Ephesus and was journeying through Macedonia to Corinth (see II Cor 8-9; Rom 15:26-28—at which time the Macedonian Christians did contribute). Indeed, the collection argument actually works in favor of Ephesus and a dating *ca.* 55: If Phil were written at Caesarea or Rome, that successful collection would have been past history; why, then, in reciting the history of the Philippians' generosity in Phil 4:10-20, does Paul not mention their contribution to it? Moreover, in 4:14-16 Paul reminisces about what seems to have been his first and only visit to Philippi. If he were writing from Caesarea or Rome, he would have been to Philippi at least three times (n. 3 above).

There is no way to decide this issue; but the best arguments seem to be on the side of Ephesus, and the weakest on the side of Caesarea.

### Unity: One Letter or Two or Three?

Although the unity of many of the Pauline letters has been questioned in the endless ingenuity of scholarship, only two have remained subjects of major debate: II Cor and Phil. What external and internal evidence causes uncertainty about the unity of Phil (which began to be doubted at the end of the 19th century)? Externally, in the mid-2d century Polycarp (*Philippians* 3:2) mentions Paul's "letters" to the Philippians.<sup>38</sup> If precise, this could refer to the canonical letter and lost ones, or to the canonical letter and II Thess

<sup>36</sup>On the other hand, as indicated throughout this Chapter, there are close parallels between Phil and I Cor.

<sup>37</sup>Gal 2:10 shows that Paul agreed in the Jerusalem meeting (*ca.* AD 49) to remember the poor, but nothing is said in Gal about a planned collection of money in the various Pauline churches to be carried to Jerusalem such as spelled out in the letters of AD 56-58.

<sup>38</sup>Yet *Philippians* 11:3 (preserved only in Latin) seems to speak of the beginning of Paul's "epistle" (singular).

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(Chapter 26, n. 9 below), or to the original form of the canonical correspondence before an editor combined several letters into one. Internally, Phil 3:1b ("To write the same things to you is no trouble to me") suggests that Paul might have written previously to the Philippians. If so, was he referring to a lost letter or to an originally independent section of what now has been collected as Phil? At the end of chap. 2 (vv. 23–30) Paul alludes to his travel plans, which he usually does toward the conclusion of his letters; and the "Finally" in the following verse (3:1a) sounds as if he is about to close the letter; yet two chaps. follow. Is it logical to have the sending back of Epaphroditus mentioned (2:25–30) before his arrival bringing gifts to Paul (4:18)? Some think that (if 3:1b–4:3 were an insert from another letter) 3:1a and 4:4 would fit together uniquely well; also then the different adversaries detected in Phil could be assigned to different letters.

As for the letters thought to be combined in Phil, the common denominator in the several theories is that chap. 3<sup>39</sup> constitutes in whole or in part a separate letter:

- *Two original letters* (G. Bornkamm; J. Gnilka; E. J. Goodspeed; L. E. Keck), e.g.,
  - I. 3:1b–4:20: A letter when Paul received the gift brought by Epaphroditus;
  - II. 1:1–3:1a + 4:21–23: A letter after Epaphroditus recovered from sickness.<sup>40</sup>
- *Three original letters* (more popular: F. W. Beare, J. A. Fitzmyer, R. H. Fuller, H. Koester; E. Lohse, W. Marxsen, W. Schmithals), e.g.,
  - I. 4:10–20: A letter acknowledging the gift received by Paul from the Philippians;
  - II. 1:1–3:1a + 4:4–7,21–23: A letter urging a worthy life, rejoicing in the Lord;
  - III. 3:1b–4:3 + 4:8–9: A corrective and polemical letter.

There is no doubt that the Body of Philippians (1:12–4:20; see Summary Page) has a mixture of material, wherein Paul switches back and forth between autobiographical description (his position in prison and relations with the Philippians through Epaphroditus and Timothy), exhortations, and warnings against false teachers. The division into two or three letters is really an attempt of scholars to rearrange that material more logically and consistently. Yet one cannot find in Phil two or three distinct Opening and Concluding Formulas, so that if originally there were several letters, the compiler

<sup>39</sup>Described variously as beginning in 3:1b or 3:2 and as terminating in 3:21 or 4:1. Those who split 3:1 into two parts often see the first part of the verse (3:1a) looking back to chap. 2, and the second part (3:1b) looking ahead to the warnings about to be given.

<sup>40</sup>A suggested variation detects I: 1:1–3:1a + 4:2–7,10–23 (a pastoral letter written after both the events above) and II: 3:1b–4:1 + 4:8–9 (a polemical letter written after Paul was released from prison and false teachers had arrived).

abbreviated them. Moreover, his logic in moving segments around (e.g., 4:8-9) and combining these letters into the present irregular sequence is far from clear. Favoring unity is the fact that there are rare Pauline words and a community of ideas shared by the proposed two or three letters. Approximately, therefore, an equal number of scholars still maintains that the present form of Phil is the original form. One can postulate that in prison Paul wrote in a "stream of consciousness" style, communicating his grateful acknowledgments of past relationships and present kindnesses, his exhortations and corrections as they came to mind, without recasting them in a totally logical sequence. In any case this debate<sup>41</sup> need not be of great concern to ordinary readers who, given the very divided state of scholarship, are wiser to read the letter in its present sequence, recognizing that it reflects relationships over a period of time and that more than one danger may be envisioned.

### Issues and Problems for Reflection

- (1) In discussing the unity of Phil, I suggested that the debate over whether the preserved letter represents a compilation from two or three original letters is not of great importance to most readers. That affirmation may be tested by studying one of the theories of compilation and seeing if there are ways in which it affects the basic meaning of Phil.
- (2) It is a worthwhile exercise to review the way in which the Christological Hymn is printed in several modern NT translations. What effect, if any, does a decision about the number of strophes and the lines assigned to each (n. 19 and 20 above) have on meaning?
- (3) Paul seems remarkably self-revelatory in Phil. Based on its contents, what would have been Paul's strengths as a pastor in relation to the community at Philippi? He is clearly polemic toward the workers of evil in 3:2ff. How effective is what he says in refuting them? Granted that he is not likely to change their minds, how likely is his approach to protect or correct the Philippians whom both he and they are addressing?
- (4) Because of his imprisonment Paul reflects several times in this letter on his relationship to Christ and in that way reveals his own "spirituality." For instance, Paul invites his readers to imitate him (3:17) and to imitate Christ (2:5). Indeed, at the beginning of the letter Paul calls himself a servant of Christ to prepare for speaking of Christ as one who took on or accepted

<sup>41</sup>B. D. Rahtjen, NTS 6 (1959-60), 167-73, argues for three letters; and B. S. Mackay, NTS 7 (1960-61), 161-70, rebuts him. Collange, *Philippians*, argues for three letters; and W. J. Dalton, *Biblica* 60 (1979), 97-102, rebuts him. T. E. Pollard, NTS 13 (1966-67), 57-66, traces thematic connections throughout Phil; and J. T. Reed, JBL 115 (1996), 63-90, thinks that 3:1 does not mark a different letter but is a hesitation formula simply indicating a change in theme.

"the form of a servant" in 2:7. Notice that the imitation is not simply a human undertaking (2:13). How practical is such imitation after nearly two thousand years?

(5) In the Opening Formula Paul addresses himself to the saints at Philippi "with the *episkopoi* [overseers/bishops] and *diakonoi* [ministers/deacons]." Discussion of those two groups of functionaries<sup>42</sup> has been colored by modern Christian attitudes toward bishops, favorable and unfavorable. To avoid such an early presence of bishops (of which there is no evidence in the other protoPauline letters) some scholars have dismissed this as a later interpolation or sought to detect Pauline disdain for such dignitaries (implicitly contrasted with the self-designation of Paul and Timothy who claim only to be "servants" of Christ). Many more scholars today caution that the Philippian *episkopoi* were not the same as the functionaries of that name described at a later era in the deuteroPauline Pastorals. (For instance, since secular *episkopoi* were financial officers of groups, could Paul have been addressing those at Philippi who helped raise the money to support him?) Nothing further, however, is said in Phil; and so scholars' statements about these figures involve considerable guessing. A more helpful exercise, employing the evidence of contemporaneous Pauline writings, is to compare the "overseers" at Philippi to "those over you [*proistamenoī*] in the Lord" in I Thess 5:12, to the "administrators" (*kybernēseis*) in I Cor 12:28, and to "the one who exhorts" (*parakalōn*) in Rom 12:8. To that may be added what Acts 12:17; 15:2,4,6,22,23; 21:18 reports about James and the elders/presbyters at Jerusalem. Seemingly the churches of the 50s were structured, but not in the same way or with universally used titles.

(6) After reflecting on the different views reported in the subsection above about the christology of the hymn in 2:5–11, one may compare themes in that passage to other Pauline and deuteroPauline passages such as I Cor 8:6; II Cor 5:18–19; 8:9; Rom 5:12–19; Col 1:15–20.

(7) Paul identifies himself as having been a Pharisee (3:5; see Acts 23:6); and therefore, even before believing in Jesus, he would have anticipated the resurrection of the dead. We have seen one modification of his belief in I Thess 4:15–17 where he asserts that the dead in Christ will rise to meet him at the parousia. Yet, even before the parousia, Paul thinks that if he departs this life he will be with Christ (Phil 1:23). In 3:11, perhaps rhetorically, he says, "If possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead."<sup>43</sup> How does one reconcile these expectations? With what modality are such expectations part of Christian hope today?

<sup>42</sup>Collange and Soards take the words in apposition, so that "overseers" and "ministers" refer to only one group of people. Ministry in Paul is a complicated issue, e.g., see Ellis, *Pauline Theology*.

<sup>43</sup>See R. E. Otto, n. 7 above.

(8) The social situation at Philippi when Paul first came may belong more appropriately to the study of Acts 16:12–40, but Lydia was prominent there even as Euodia and Syntyche were important in the community that Paul wrote to five to ten years later (Phil 4:2). Thomas and Portefaix offer material that invites fascinating reflection on what the gospel of Christ may have meant to women in this Roman city that was the first place in Europe evangelized by Paul.

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