

Beyond the Hymnic Hypothesis: Phil 2:8b–9 as the Original Kernel

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Since Lohmeyer (1927/1928) wrote his article about Phil 2:6–11, “it has become a *sententia recepta* of literary criticism that Phil 2:6–11 is clearly to be distinguished from the neighbouring verses of the Epistle” (Martin, 1967, p. 28). Today it is widely assumed that its author was not Paul (cf. Fee, 1995, p. 40) and that this text “is a pendant, attached by verse 5 to a Pauline section of *Mahnrede* and utilised by the Apostle to buttress his appeal to his converts at Philippi” (Martin, 1967, p. 44).

Nonetheless, this general agreement has not prevented some exegetes from adding different perspectives on it; on the contrary, the secondary literature on Phil 2:6–11, “which has mushroomed incrementally over the past forty years, exceeds that on all the rest of the letter combined” (Fee, 1995, p. 39). Many scholars have discussed the extent and structure of the presumed hymn, suggesting new divisions in stanzas or cutting this or that phrase. However, in the history of the exegesis of Phil 2:6–11, the position that this text would have been created by Paul himself has never been absent (cf. Strimple, 1979, p. 249; Basevi, 1998; Basevi & Chapa, 1993; Fee, 1992, 1995; Holloway, 2017). Between these two positions, I argue in this article that there was a pre-existent text that Paul quoted in his letter, but this text consists only of vv. 8b–9; the rest is Paul’s composition: Phil 2:6–8a is the continuation of Paul’s own exhortation to humility, and Phil 2:10–11 is a Pauline gloss based on Isa 45:23.

1. Phil 2:6–11 as a pre-existent hymn

Before proposing an alternative, it is important to show the points that favour the most widespread understanding of Phil 2:6–11 as a pre-existent hymn. In order to make a clearer presentation, I include here the division into lines and my translation:

6a	ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ υπάρχων	who, being in the form of God
6b	οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο	did not regard as a robbery
6c	τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ,	to be equal with God,
7a	ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν	but emptied himself
7b	μορφὴν δούλου λαβών,	taking the form of a slave,
7c	ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος·	becoming in the likeness of human beings,
7d	καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθείς ὡς ἄνθρωπος	and being found in shape as a human being,
8a	ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν	he humiliated himself,
8b	γενόμενος υπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου,	becoming obedient to the point of death
8c	θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.	even death on a cross.
9a	διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν	Therefore, God also highly exalted him
9b	καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα	and graced him with the name
9c	τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα,	that is above every name,
10a	ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ	so that to the name of Jesus
10b	πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη	every knee may bend
10c	ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων	of those of the heaven, the earth and the netherworld,
11a	καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται	and every tongue may confess
11b	ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός	that Jesus Christ is Lord,
11c	εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.	to the glory of God the Father. ¹

The following arguments are usually marshalled to defend that this text is pre-Pauline (following the criteria proposed by Brown, 1997, pp. 489–493):

1. The text would contain a marker indicating that what follows does not belong to the author. The relative pronoun ὃς is usually

¹ Except for Phil 2:6–11, biblical quotations follow *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), unless noted otherwise. Textual variations in our text are irrelevant for our discussion.

cited as this marker, as in Col 1:15 or 1 Tim 3:16 (cf. Brown, 1997, p. 490). Lohmeyer (1927/1928) thought that v. 5 (ὁ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) was “eine Art von Zitationsformel” (p. 13) because it expresses Paul’s intention of indicating that what follows is something well known by everybody.

2. These lines would have a style that breaks with the epistolary style that precedes. Perhaps the most visible feature of this style would be the structure of the text. After Weiss (1897) divided the hymn into two main parts, scholars have proposed various divisions of the hymn into stanzas: for Lohmeyer (1927/1928, p. 10), the hymn would be composed of six strophes of three lines each (vv. 6, 7a–c, 7d–8b, 9, 10, 11, considering 8c a Pauline addition); for Jeremias (1953, pp. 152–154), there would be three strophes of four lines each (6–7b, 7c–8b, 9–11; for him, 8c, 10c, and 11c would be Paul’s additions). Other features that make this text more poetic than what precedes and what follows are the synonymic and antithetic parallelisms and assonances (cf. Martin, 1967, p. 39). Barbara Eckman (1980), for her part, maintained that the hymn was constructed according to Greek metric rules.
3. These lines contain some very peculiar words that do not seem to pertain to the Pauline vocabulary: μορφή, ἀρπαγμός, ὑπερυψώω and καταχθόνιος. If Paul were the author of these lines, it would seem strange to find so many *hapax legomena* in so few lines (cf. Martin, 1967, p. 48).
4. Beyond the vocabulary, some exegetes have also suggested that the theology does not seem to be that of Paul either. On the one hand, important Pauline topics are not present, such as the cross (of course, if with Lohmeyer and others we should remove v. 8c), the resurrection of Christ and the role of the Church; on the other hand, contrary to Paul’s use, the author of these lines would consider Jesus equal to God, call him a “servant” (δοῦλος), speak of his exaltation with the verb ὑπερυψώω, and have a threefold conception of the cosmos (cf. Martin, 1967, pp. 48–49). For some authors, the most striking difference would be that the hymn seems inspired by the canticles of the Servant of Yahweh. At the

same time, “Paul never makes use of any of the Servant language, except where he is quoting tradition which he has received from pre-Pauline Christianity” (Fuller, 1954, p. 57).

5. But one of the most relevant arguments to discover the presence of a foreign text—and the one that normally first arouses suspicion—is that there is something that breaks the line of thought of the main text. In the lines immediately preceding Phil 2:6, Paul was exhorting the Philippians to overcome some difficulties: to put an end to internal struggles over humility (cf. Phil 2:1–5) and to persevere amid their suffering, probably persecution (cf. Phil 1:27–30). Even though there is obviously some coherence when the text speaks of humiliation and death on the cross, the primary concern of the so-called hymn that follows is to present Christ as a model of *obedience*, something never previously mentioned in the letter; notably, Paul uses the word “obedience” only at Phil 2:12, right after this passage, as if to justify its insertion. Now, if Paul created this text by himself, one wonders why he would ever speak of *obedience* here. “The verses 5–11 clearly interrupt the flow of the hortatory theme” (Martin, 1967, p. 42).

Now, despite the seemingly massive evidence for the claim that Phil 2:6–11 is a pre-Pauline text, particularly due to the impressive structure, we have pointed out that not all scholars agree on the precise form of this allegedly seamless architecture; as Gnllka (1968, p. 125) himself lamented, “die unterschiedlichen Ergebnisse im Bemühen um die strophische Gliederung wirken entmutigend.” Moreover, in order to fit the text into a logical pattern, phrases have to be removed (the most accepted, but not the only one suggested, is v. 8c). As Fee states, “the very fact that there is so little agreement on this *crucial* matter calls the whole procedure into question” (Fee, 1995, pp. 42–43); for example, Eckman’s metrical proposal required removing or emending several words and contradicted all prior strophic proposals (1980, pp. 260–261). Indeed, in recent decades, the pre-Pauline nature of these lines has been called into question, and today the consensus may be shifting toward an original composition of the Apostle of the Gentiles (Holloway, 2017, p. 115; cf. Bartolomei, 2024; Blumenthal, 2022; Dürr, 2024).

2. Narrowing the focus: The confessional kernel (Phil 2:8b–9)

Let us reconsider the application of the criteria, indicating that we are dealing with a pre-existing text, starting with the one that should be the basis for any other: the break with the context. The majority of interpreters, even those who think that Phil 2:6–11 contains a pre-existent hymn, agree that this text works here as a kind of paradigm (cf. Fee, 1995, p. 196, n. 14) in the middle of Phil 1:27–2:18, which is overall an exhortation (cf. Martin, 1967, p. 42).

The immediate context in the exhortation is to overcome the internal unrest: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3–4). Paul invites the Philippians to have the same mind of Christ (τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ [Phil 2:5]). The following lines illustrate what Christ’s attitude was. In this sense, Phil 2:6 is a very logical development of Phil 2:5: Christ, though he was equal to God—and this was not something he acquired by robbery but belonged to him—emptied and humiliated himself. In this context, the ὅς of v. 6 is simply a relative pronoun whose antecedent is explicitly Christ; there is no need to see it as the conventional form of introducing traditional material (Fee, 1995, p. 41; Holloway, 2017, p. 117).

Despite the claims made by those who deny Paul’s authorship of Phil 2:6–11, continuity in vocabulary with the preceding text may be defended. While the Philippians are told not to do anything from “vainglory” (κενοδοξία), but consider others with “humility” (ταπεινοφροσύνη) (cf. Phil 2:3), Christ is said to have “emptied” (κενόω) and “humiliated” (ταπεινώω) himself (cf. Phil 2:7–8); moreover, the Philippians shall “consider” (ἡγήομαι) others superior to themselves (cf. Phil 2:3), while Christ did not “consider” (ἡγήομαι) his equality with God something he had stolen (cf. Phil 2:6); Cerfaux (1959) had already observed that “the hymn fits the exhortation which we have just heard, and the ideas and even the wording echo it” (p. 376). Holloway concludes:

It is remarkable how well fitted Phil 2:6–11 is to its present context. Not only does it repeat the antithesis (“not ... but”) of 2:3–4, but it also illustrates precisely the attitude (humility) and behavior (obedience) enjoined respectively in 2:1–4 and 2:12–16. This consideration, coupled with the fact that a similar logic—Christ-believers are to act as Christ himself acted—can be found in other undisputed Pauline texts (e.g., Rom 15:1–3; 2 Cor 8:7–9), makes a good case that 2:6–11 is a piece of elevated prose produced by Paul precisely for the exhortation of Phil 2:1–16. (2017, p. 116)

Holloway’s argument is, in my view, largely convincing: Phil 2:6–8a fits the preceding exhortation so well—in vocabulary, structure, and logic—that the case for Paul’s authorship of these verses is strong. However, this very coherence makes the shift in v. 8b all the more noticeable. Obedience is not a theme of the preceding exhortation, and, except Phil 2:12, it will not be mentioned in the remaining lines of the letter. Thus, while vv. 6–8a continue Paul’s own reasoning about humility; line 8b introduces a concept that draws our attention to the possibility that something does not belong here. This thesis thus goes one step beyond Fee and Holloway: while agreeing that vv. 6–8a is Paul’s own composition; it maintains that the shift at v. 8b marks the point where Paul incorporated a pre-existent text.

It is true that, as noted above, there is some vocabulary very peculiar to this text, which some have taken as an indication that Paul would not be the author of it. One of these words was μορφή, which, however, is a widespread Greek word, and the fact that Paul does not use it in the rest of his corpus does not necessarily indicate that he never used it at all on other occasions: perhaps that he did not have the occasion. Moreover, Paul repeatedly uses words derived from this root: in the same letter to the Philippians, he affirms that Jesus Christ “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be con-formed (σύμμορφον) to the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21), and Paul considers himself con-formed (συνμορφιζόμενος) with the death of Christ (cf. Phil 3:10). In Phil 2:6, wanting to express the transformation of Christ from God to a man, remaining the same Christ, Paul found that the word μορφή expressed precisely what he wanted, and therefore he used it (Fee, 1995, p. 204). As for the word ἀπραγμός, it is not only a *hapax* in Paul but

also in the Bible, and it is virtually non-existent in non-biblical Greek. Indeed, it is a secondary or derivative substantive, the abstraction of the verb ἀρπάζω, a type of word that anyone might coin for a single occasion and that is “not in common use in the older Greek” (Robertson, 2006, p. 151). Paul, however, uses two words of the same root: ἄπραξ and ἀρπάζω (1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:10; 2 Cor 12:2, 4; and 1 Thess 4:17). If we imagine Paul himself penning these lines and, while speaking of Christ, giving free rein to his poetic gifts, it is not unthinkable that he might himself have coined a word like ἀρπαγμός. As for the poetic features that these lines contain and several authors have underlined, we should grant that Paul himself may be the author: “Paul is capable of especially exalted prose whenever he thinks on the work of Christ” (Fee, 1995, p. 41; see also Yarbro Collins, 2003). Paul’s poetic skills might entirely explain the parallelisms that scholars often notice in the text.

However, if the subject, form and vocabulary of these verses may be coherent with Paul’s style, the rupture at line 8b remains. Thus, we shall consider the possibility that from v. 8b on, Paul could have used a pre-existent text. Turning to the content, we may define this text as a confession (cf. Hardgrove, 2008, p. 27; Basevi & Chapa, 1993, p. 356) of the Paschal mystery: that Christ became obedient to the point of death on a cross, and therefore God exalted him. While Paul was presenting to the Philippians the example of Christ who humiliated himself (ἐταπείνωσεν), he thought that this confession fitted his message quite well. He included it, not so much because of the *obedience* of Christ, but because of the humiliation implied in voluntarily undergoing death on a cross.

However, if we can claim that line 8b marks the beginning of this confession, what would be its end? A key to answering this question comes from the fact that vv. 10–11 is a paraphrase of the LXX version of Isa 45:23: “To me (ἐμοί) every knee shall bow, every tongue shall confess to God” (my translation). In this paraphrase, the author attributes to Christ what Isaiah attributed to God, changing “to me” to “to the name of Jesus” (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ) and inserting, after the verb ἐξομολογήσεται, the well-known Christian confession: “Jesus Christ is Lord (κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός)” (cf. 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9). At the end of

this paraphrase, the text comes back to Isaiah by pointing out that all this is directed to the glory of God (εἰς δόξαν Θεοῦ πατρὸς).

Now, the question is whether this paraphrase is part of the pre-existent confession, or if its author is Paul. Two facts are remarkable in this regard: on the one hand, the text of Isa 45:23 is only used once more in the New Testament, and it is precisely Paul who does this in Rom 14:11. In his Letter to the Romans, by means of this quotation, he expresses God's unique prerogative of being the judge of all. On the other hand, the confession about the lordship of Christ, though evidently not original to Paul, is very dear to him (cf. 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5). One could therefore make a strong case for the Pauline composition of vv. 10 and 11, and I propose to interpret them as a gloss that Paul adds to the borrowed confession. If this is the case—and we do not need to postulate a different author for these lines—, the original confession would have ended by saying that to Christ was granted “the name that is above every name” (v. 9). At this point, Paul commented on what this meant: paraphrasing Isa 45, he would show that the adoration of the Lord Jesus Christ would not contradict the adoration of the Father, but that precisely by bending one's knees to him the glory is given to God the Father.

The only verses, then, that seem to be left for a pre-existent text are 8b–9. Indeed, it is here that we find the verb ὑπερῴω (v. 9), which, as we have seen, is a *hapax* in the New Testament. Thus, the pre-existent text would be: “[Christ] became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and graced him with the name that is above every name.” Paul, exhorting the Christians of Philippi to practise humility like Christ, would have remembered this confession and would have inserted it into his own exhortation, which he would then have continued to elaborate by drawing on the famous Isaianic text—so dear to him—or on another known doxology. In this context, the mention of obedience was not so interesting to Paul's immediate purposes—what was relevant was the implied humiliation of the cross. However, as one often does when quoting, he kept even those words that were not immediately meaningful to his purpose, as Paul commonly does (cf. Rom 4:6–8). After the quotation, Paul would have completed it by paraphrasing Isa 45:23, making explicit that the

unusual expression “the name that is above every name” is that name to which every knee shall bend, that it is not to be confused with God the Father, but that is directed to his glory.

3. Multiple attestation

Among the criteria used to detect early hymns, Michel Gourgues (2016, pp. 222 and 224) mentions a crucial criterion: the multiple attestation. If we could find that a supposedly pre-existent text is found more or less literally in other texts, it would be a clear indication that it predated the biblical text. In my view, this should be the final criterion to confirm that a text comes from a different source. However, do we find Phil 2:8–9 in other ancient texts?

I suggest that we could apply this criterion in two ways. First, we may verify that short confessions *similar* to Phil 2:8b–9 existed among Christians in the 1st century. Indeed, such confessions are quite frequent in the New Testament. In the Letter to the Hebrews, a similar reasoning is presented by the author: Jesus “endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Before this confession, the same author had identified the suffering of Christ with his obedience: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience (ὕπακοήν) through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), and this obedience will lead him to perfection (τελειωθείς, perhaps an allusion to exaltation?) and to become “source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5:9). Furthermore, the Petrine speeches of the Acts of the Apostles contain some formulae that could be compared. In the speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter mentions several times the death and resurrection of Christ using different vocabulary, including that of the exaltation (cf. Acts 2:33). He concludes: “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Without speaking of the cross, in Solomon’s Portico, he will say: “The God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate” (Acts 3:13). Furthermore, speaking of resurrection instead of glorification, he says later on to the people: “You killed

the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15); to the leaders of Israel he says: “[Jesus] whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 4:10); and, to Cornelius’ household: “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day” (Acts 10:39–40). However, what makes these confessions of the Petrine speeches more similar to Phil 2:8–9 is the fact that, after each one of these confessions the explicit mention of the name of Jesus is made: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the *name* of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38); “By faith in his *name*, his *name* itself has made this man strong” (Acts 3:16); “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other *name* under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12); “Who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his *name*” (Acts 10:43). The point of these parallels is not to identify a single fixed text behind all these passages, but to show that the short confessional pattern of death, exaltation, and bestowal of the name was widespread enough in the early Church to make the existence of a short confession like Phil 2:8b–9 entirely plausible.

The second way to address the multiple attestations is to investigate our text’s use in the liturgy. This is a methodological leap, but it is worth exploring this possibility. Liturgy is formed through the development of tradition and often contains very ancient traditions. To my knowledge, Phil 2:6–11 has not been used as a cohesive whole in any liturgical tradition, apart from the normal biblical readings; its current use in the Liturgy of the Hours as a hymn dates only from after Vatican II, when Lohmeyer’s theory became dominant. This lends little support to the hypothesis that the so-called Christ hymn existed prior to or independently of the epistle. However, there is an ancient Latin liturgical text that, with some minor differences, corresponds to Phil 2:8b–9. Before the reform of the Second Vatican Council, it was sung as the gradual of the Maundy Thursday mass, as well as on other occasions of the Divine Office in the Paschal Triduum.

*Christus factus est pro nobis oboediens
usque ad mortem,
mortem autem crucis.*

*Christ became for us obedient
to the point of death
even death on a cross.*

Propter quod et Deus exaltavit illum
et dedit illi nomen
quod est super omne nomen
(Hesbert, 1935, p. 93).

Therefore, God also exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name.

Apart from the beginning—“Christus”—, the main difference between this gradual and our text is that it contains a “for us” (*pro nobis*). Moreover, the Latin text prefers the word “dedit” instead of the “donavit” used by the Vulgate (cf. Frede, 1966–1971, pp. 139–140), and that would correspond better to the Greek ἐχαρίσατο; three of the four oldest manuscripts of the gradual read dedit against the Vulgate’s donavit (cf. Hesbert, 1935, pp. 92–93).

It is commonly assumed, and not without reason, that this gradual is simply a liturgical adaptation of Phil 2:8–9. Nevertheless, the opposite cannot be ruled out. The *Christus factus est* is found unanimously in the most ancient *Antiphonales* of the Roman Church. Indeed, the manuscripts do not extend further back than the 9th century, because no extant *Antiphonales* predate that period. However, this text appears in *all* the manuscripts of the Roman *Antiphonales* of that same century.²

Conversely, we tend to suppose that liturgies are built drawing texts from the Bible, but the opposite is often true. It is widely acknowledged that the words of the institution of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians and the Synoptic Gospels are drawn from a previous liturgy, not vice versa. Similarly, it would not be surprising if an ancient text of the Roman Liturgy, such as *Christus factus est*, lay at the basis of a New Testament text. In his *Comparative Liturgy*, Anton Baumstark (1958) wrote:

We must avoid exaggeration, however, and not pretend to discover Biblical reminiscences everywhere. On the contrary, it may happen that in genuinely primitive strata of liturgical prose, where Scriptural quotations or reminiscences might appear to exist, the language

2 It is reported as the responsorial gradual for Maundy Thursday in the Gradual of Rheinau (ca. 800), in the Cantatory of Monza (ca. 820), the Gradual of Mont-Blandin (ca. 800), the Antiphonary of Compiègne (ca. 877) and the Gradual of Senlis (ca. 880) (cf. Hesbert, 1935, pp. 92–93). The same tradition is kept by Alcuin (PL 101, 454b). I did not find any use of this gradual in other liturgies.

which the Scriptural author himself used is, in fact, only the echo of liturgical language already established in the bosom of the most primitive Christian communities (p. 59).

Baumstark discovered that a fundamental law of liturgical evolution was that “ancient liturgical traditions are best preserved in that primitive conditions are maintained with greater tenacity in the more sacred seasons of the Liturgical Year” (p. 27). Now, as we have observed, the *Christus factus est* is attached to the Sacred Triduum from antiquity, indisputably the most ancient and important liturgical season. Another sign that we are dealing with an old text, according to Baumstark, is that “the older a text is, the less is it influenced by the Bible” (p. 59). The fact that all the testimonies of the *Christus factus est*, against Phil 2:8, have the “pro nobis” and a vocabulary that does not conform to the Biblical text may be a strong indication that they are not drawing from it. Indeed, the fact that this text is not “corrected” with the Bible increases the likelihood that the text preceded the Letter to the Philippians, and not the opposite; in addition, Frede (1966–1971, pp. 131–137) records several Latin patristic citations and paraphrases of Phil 2:8 that introduce *pro nobis*—a phrase absent from the New Testament text. While this does not constitute proof, it lends the hypothesis considerable plausibility.

It is true that the *Christus factus est*, as far as I am aware, only exists in the Roman tradition. If we could be sure that this text were present in other liturgies, it would be a very powerful reason to assert its antiquity. However, this should not be the final word: it is quite possible that an ancient text was created and remained in only one church, and in the case of the *Christus factus est*, that church would be the one in Rome. Indeed, until the 20th century, tradition and scholars had agreed that Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians from Rome, and, even today, it remains the best hypothesis (Fee, 1995, p. 36). This convergence is worth noting: if Paul wrote from Rome—the traditional and still defensible hypothesis—the proximity to this Roman liturgical text would be a remarkable coincidence. The hypothesis, however, does not depend on it; the *Christus factus est* may have reached Paul through other channels, given the mobility of early Christian liturgical traditions.

Conclusions

The hypothesis that the original confession is limited to Phil 2:8b–9 can explain why Phil 2:6–11 represents no real break with the preceding verses, why this text speaks of obedience when the subject of the preceding exhortation was humility and suffering, and, finally, why it is so difficult to agree on the structure of the alleged hymn, because it was never a hymn. Now, many studies on early Christology comment on the alleged pre-Pauline hymn of Phil 2:6–11, focusing very often on three topics: the figure of the Isaianic Servant, the salvific value of the cross, and the pre-existence of Christ with the high Christology that it entails (see, for example, the works of Murphy-O'Connor [1976], Wong [1986], DeSimone [1992], Aletti [2005], Tsui [2006], Gorman [2007], and Lambrecht [2007]). If my suggestion is correct, these three topics would need to be significantly reshaped, since they would belong not to a pre-Pauline hymn, but either to Paul's own composition (vv. 6–8a, 10–11) or to a much shorter confession (vv. 8b–9):

1. Scholars often point out the Isaianic figure of the Servant of the Lord as one motive behind Phil 2:6–11 (cf. Gourgues, 1992, pp. 52–53; Cullmann [1968, pp. 76–77 and 79] sees the idea of the Servant only in Phil 2:7). This allusion, though limited, would still be present in the shorter text of vv. 8b–9, since it contains some of the phrases that most closely resemble Isaiah: “He poured out himself to death” (Isa 53:12); “He shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high” (Isa 52:13). The nature of Phil 2:8b–9 would still be a confession of the Paschal mystery shaped by the figure of the suffering servant. Moreover, if the Latin version of the gradual were original, the pro-existence of the Servant, his “acting in favour of others,” would also be present in the “pro nobis” of Christ.

2. Contrary to the common belief that v. 8c is a Pauline addition to the original hymn, according to my suggestion, the cross would play a central role in this confession. Apparently, in the original confession of Phil 2:8b–9, no salvific value would seem to be attributed to the cross or to Christ's death: no mention of the salvation or the beneficiary of that salvation is made. Thus, it would look as if Christ's obedience until

death were a necessary condition for his own exaltation, without any relation to other human beings. This mention of the cross, apart from its salvific value, is found in other New Testament texts, as in the already-mentioned Heb 12:2, where Jesus is presented as a model for believers who endured the cross and were then seated at the right hand of God. Nevertheless, one should also affirm that the fact that something is not explicitly mentioned does not mean it is not meant at all. Indeed, in some of these New Testament expressions where the salvific value is not immediately attached to Christ's suffering, after a few verses, it is explicitly affirmed:

God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:36–38).

Indeed, if, as we have suggested above, Phil 2:8b–9 is not foreign to the theology of the Lord's servant, nothing makes more sense than considering that his obedience was a vicarious sacrifice: "He was wounded for our transgressions" (Isa 53:5); "He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). If the original text had the "pro nobis,"—whether Paul adapted the confession as an encomium, or whether the phrase was a later liturgical addition, or simply that Paul chose not to reproduce it in full—the relationship between cross and salvation would be more explicit (cf. Heb 5:8–9, where Christ's obedient suffering is explicitly linked to eternal salvation for those who obey him).

3. Finally, if both the opening verses (6–8a) and the closing paraphrase of Isaiah (10–11) are Paul's own composition, the high Christological themes that scholars usually ascribe to the pre-Pauline hymn would belong entirely to Paul. The pre-existence of Christ and his equality with God (vv. 6–7), the descent from divine condition to human slavery (vv. 7–8a), and the cosmic adoration grounded in Isa 45:23 (vv. 10–11)—all of this would be Pauline theology, not pre-Pauline tradition. In particular, the application of Isa 45:23 to Christ ("To me every knee shall bow") would be a Pauline gloss to the last phrase of the original confessional

kernel: since, in that confession, a “name above every name”—which in Isaiah is referred to God—has now been given to Christ, Paul would have felt the need to explain the shift. The original confession (vv. 8b–9) would thus contain none of these themes explicitly: it would simply affirm that Christ became obedient unto death on a cross, and that God therefore exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name. This does not mean, however, that the original expression was not audacious: Paul’s very need to clarify shows how bold the affirmation of the early Church was, whose confession gave Jesus a title above every other name. A full exploration of these implications lies beyond the scope of this article.

In conclusion, reducing the preexistent kernel to only Phil 2:8b–9 offers an elegant solution to the “architectural” impasse that bedevilled scholarly proposals over the last century. By identifying these verses as a concise paschal confession—perhaps of Roman origin and preserved in the *Christus factus est*—we can finally account for the presence of “obedience” in a context otherwise dominated by “humility”. This hypothesis restores Phil 2:6–8a and probably 10–11 to Paul’s own creative hand, showing that the high Christology of the *kenosis* and the cosmic lordship based on Isaiah 45:23 are not fragments of an external “hymn” that Paul merely “utilised,” but are the very core of his own theological response to the needs of the Philippian community. The structural “irregularities” that have led scholars to propose endless and conflicting strophic divisions vanish once we realise that Paul was not quoting a poem, but framing a short, powerful confession of faith within his own exalted prose.

Abstract

Beyond the Hymnic Hypothesis: Phil 2:8b–9 as the Original Kernel

This article re-evaluates the nature of Phil 2:6–11, challenging the consensus that it constitutes a seamless pre-Pauline hymn. While scholars often struggle to agree on its strophic structure, this study proposes that the original pre-existent material is limited to verses 8b–9. By analysing early Christian confessions and the Roman liturgical tradition—specifically the *Christus factus est*—the author argues that Paul

framed a brief paschal confession within his elevated prose. Consequently, the high Christological themes in verses 6–8a and the cosmic adoration in 10–11 are identified as Pauline compositions and glosses rather than inherited tradition. This hypothesis resolves long-noted structural irregularities and clarifies how the apostle integrated an ancient confession into his immediate exhortation to the Philippians.

Keywords: St. Paul, Philippians 2:6–11, Christus factus est, liturgy

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