New Testament Poems and Proclamations

1. The Christ Poem in Philippians (2:6-11)

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This is the first of a series of reflections on some New Testament poems and proclamations. I will look briefly at the text of the poem and then offer a few reflections on it.

1

It is generally agreed that Paul himself wrote this letter to the Philippians. It was written from prison between the mid-50s and mid-60s AD (he was imprisoned more than once so the exact date is uncertain). Scholars do not agree whether Paul wrote or is quoting this poem in his letter. It seems more probable that he is quoting it and it may have been an early Christian hymn. The poem is introduced by the words, 'Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus':

> Who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not count being equal with God
> as something to cling to,
> but emptied himself
> taking the form of a servant,
> born like a human being;
> he was found in human shape
> and lowered himself,'
> became obedient till death – death on a cross.
>
> Therefore God raised him high
> and gave him the name
> that is above every name,
> so that at the name of Jesus
> every knee should bend,
> in heaven, on earth and in the underworld,
> and every tongue confess
> that Jesus Christ is Lord
> to the glory of God the Father.

This is a mini epic about an extraordinary hero, who confounds expectations and dies an ignominious death. The poem has two verses, each with three parts consisting of three lines. The first verse is a descent, coming to a climax with 'death on a cross'. Then the second verse is an ascent. So it is a kind of V-shape: down then up. (In English we could think of a V for 'victory', though the word 'victory (νικη: *nike*) does not begin with 'v' in Greek.) The literature on this poem is vast. Here we can only mention a few points:

The term 'form' (μορφη: *morphe*) in 'form of God' , verse 1. line 1, recurs in 1. 5. 'form of a servant'. The word ἁρπαγμον *(harpagmon)* in 1. 3, is a *hapax*: this is the only time it appears in the New Testament. It could mean 'something to be seized' (which you don't already possess) or 'something to cling to' (which you do already possess). If it is 'something to be seized', then *morphe* would have to mean 'image', like the 'first man' Adam, who was made in God's image but tried to seize godhead by eating the forbidden fruit. But if *morphe/*form (of God) means actually being divine, then *harpagmon* would mean something to cling to which you do already possess. (As I write, we are witnessing an example of Boris our prime minister in big trouble clinging to power by hook or by crook.) Christ did *not cling* to it.

As the poem goes on to say 'he emptied himself', this seems the more likely meaning, because you can't empty yourself of what you do not already have. In that case, if the poem is pre-Pauline and Paul is quoting it, this would be a very early assertion of the hero's pre-existence. However I think the unusual word *harpagmon,* which is related to a verb meaning 'grasp' or 'rob' is *also* an allusion to the story of Adam. Adam, who was created in God's image, wanted more and tried to grasp or 'rob' God's power and privilege. Christ, who already had that power and privilege, 'emptied himself' of it, 'lowered himself' and became a mortal man. He reverses the first Adam. In very concentrated language the poem resonates with the story of 'the first Adam' by saying that this is what Christ was *not* like. Then it goes on to say what Christ *was* like and what he did.

I have translated 1 6. 'born like a human being'. Literally it says 'born [become] in the likeness (ὁμοιωμα: *homoioma*) of men'. For σχημα *(schema)* in 1.7. I have kept the usual

translation 'shape'. But these words do not mean he did not become really human: he actually died – in a painful and shameful way. *Morphe* 'form of a servant' in 1. 5 is parallel to *morphe* 'form 'of God' in 1. 1.

Paul quotes the poem in his letter to urge the Philippians to 'have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus' – his massive *generosity.* He had so much and 'emptied himself', poured himself out – till death. The hallmark of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is extraordinary generosity. It is interesting that there is no mention in the poem of the doctrine of 'atonement' – that Christ's death was a 'ransom' paid to save us sinners. A God who would demand such a payment is a hideous idea. In fact, as the hero in the poem is divine, he represents a very different idea of God, a God of boundless generosity and kindness, who pours himself out. And we are invited to be of the same mind.

Then in the second verse the hero is raised high and given 'the name that is above every name': Κυριος: LORD, which is how the Septuagint Greek version of the Old Testament translated the supreme divine name Yahweh. So after the turning point at the bottom of the 'V', upwards from the depths, it is not a case of being back where he started. In each verse there is a transformation: in the first verse the divine hero descends and becomes human, in the second verse this *man* ascends and becomes Lord. That was already his 'form' at the beginning of the poem but the difference is that now he is the *man* Jesus and the human name of *Jesus* becomes a divine name before which every knee should bend – 'the human form divine'.

2

I have been reading the *Iliad* and what strikes me most forcibly is how badly the gods behave. Regardless of the consequences, they do whatever they feel like and keep quarrelling with each other. They are clearly personifications of indifferent forces in the universe or human qualities and activities, for better or worse.

In the Old Testament Yahweh is a jealous god. Early on, as a tribal god he represents the aspirations of the tribe. In the book of Joshua Yahweh directs them in their campaign to cross the Jordan and conquer the land: 'Yahweh spoke to Joshua, "Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread on I have given to you... No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life"' (Joshua 1: 1-4). With the prophets Yahweh sometimes represents human aspirations to behave better than before: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6). Like the Greek gods he is a personification of energies in our world and ourselves.

Jesus preached an admirable ethic of generosity, though he himself was not perfect. The gospels report him as on occasions being publicly rude – cruel – to his mother, (even though he is over 30 and no longer a teenager). He is bad tempered when he has had no breakfast and curses a fig tree for having no figs, even though it is not the time for fruit. He is unkind to Martha when she asks for help in the kitchen, he prefers her sister Mary sitting adoringly at his feet. It doesn't occur to him to offer help with the dinner himself.

Today, we quite often hear people saying they admire Jesus as a sage or ethical teacher and we should try to follow his teaching, but that we should drop 'all that Christ stuff' because it is fiction, an undesirable accretion. I don't agree. I think imagination is essential to humanity as well as kindness.

'All deities reside in the human breast'; all gods are created by the human imagination or poetic genius. They may represent personifications of ideal human potential. The Philippians poem presents an extraordinary, shocking, idea of the divine: self emptying, self-lowering to the very depths of humanity – 'a stumbling block to the Jews and to the Greeks foolishness'. Then this broken human is raised high and given the divine name Lord. Fourth-century Athanasius was to put it in his memorable chiasmus – a 'crossover' statement like the Greek letter *chi,* which is written X (also the initial letter of the Greek word Χριστος: Christ): 'He became human so that we might become divine.

The Christ poem in Philippians was written 20 to 30 years after his death (maybe even earlier if it is pre-Pauline). Jesus' followers believed he had risen from the dead; many of them had visions of

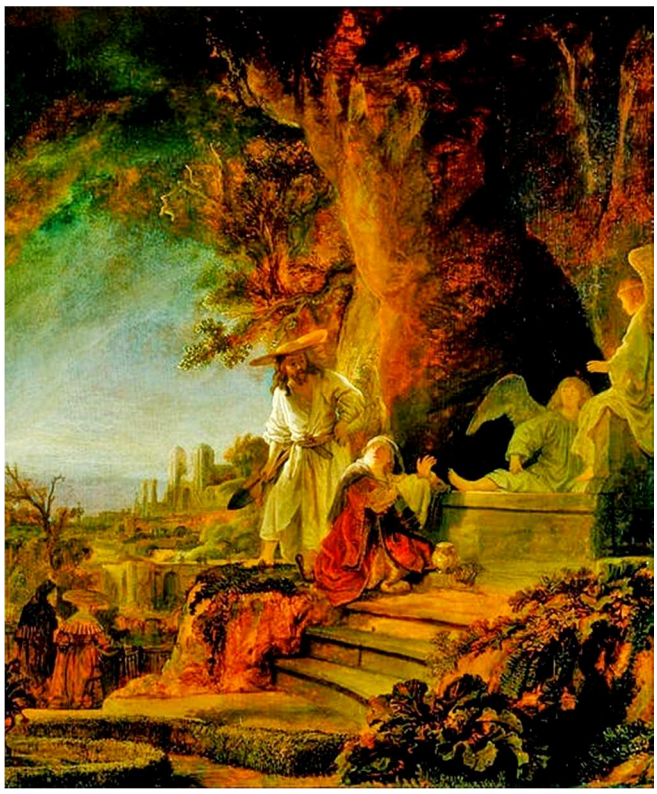
him. The word Paul uses for these visions in his list in 1 Corinthians (15: 5-9) is ὠφθη *(ophthe),* meaning 'he was seen'. They created this epic story about him very early on. He becomes a mythical hero, a hero who confounds all expectations. Yes, it is a 'poetic tale' but so are all stories of the supernatural. It is a myth but a very rich and inspiring one. I think we should take it for what it is (not mistake it for a 'history'); it would be a great pity to lose it. It resonates with tremendous power in social, political and personal life.

At the climax of the poem the human Jesus receives the name that is above every name, so that at this name, 'every knee should bend,/in heaven, on earth and in the underworld,/ and every tongue confess/ that Jesus Christ is Lord.' He becomes the figurehead, the representative of humanity as a whole. It is a vision of every human being counting above – mattering more – than all the visible and invisible powers that shape our society, whether thrones, dominations, principalities or powers 'in heaven, on earth and in the underworld'. These powers that 'post o'er land and ocean without rest' and rule our lives now, such as Money and the Market or manipulative Media, are seen as becoming *subject* to humanity, serving people's needs rather than exploiting them.

It is a vision of a generous and kind society. The early Christians thought this would come shortly by a supernatural intervention; Jesus would come again to inaugurate this reign 'in the lifetime of some of those standing here present'. But that did not happen. It is up to us. Christ is to be found today in humans now on Earth. Many have worked hard or even given their lives for justice and peace. As the Nicaraguan *Peasant Mass,* written and sung during the struggle to overthrow the dictator Somoza puts :

> You are rising now
> each time we raise an arm
> to defend the people
> from profiteering dominion,
> because you're living on the farm,
> in the factory and in school;
> your struggle carries on.
> I trust in your resurrection.

When the Nicaraguan Revolution triumphed in 1979, they proceeded to redistribute the dictator's land, abolish the death penalty and set up poetry



Rembrandt, *Christ and Mary Magdelene at the tomb* (1638). commons.wikimedia.org.

workshops all over the country. Today that Revolution has suffered a terrible defeat. Daniel Ortega, a former Sandinista leader who has now changed course, has been re-elected as president (with his wife Rosario as vice president). Today they preside over an autocratic and repressive government. Other Sandinistas have kept the vision.

Again and again people struggle to create a fair and kind society. Again and again it may be thwarted. But it is a good idea, so people keep on trying. As William Blake put it in his poem *Jerusalem:*

> The Divine Vision still was seen,
> Still was the Human Form Divine,
> Weeping in weak and mortal clay,
> O Jesus, still the Form was thine.
>
> And thine the Human Face and thine
> The Human Hands and Feet and Breath,
> Entering through the Gates of Birth
> And passing through the Gates of Death.

The Divine Vision is of human wholeness, a whole society where every human being counts; it includes and raises the 'dregs of society' in the exaltation of 'the human form divine'. And as well as being socio-political, the Divine Vision is personal. In the Philippians poem the hero

descends to the depths and then is raised high. It is a classic *katabasis,* a descent to the underworld, a venture that may or may not succeed. (Orpheus fails to bring his wife back up and he is subsequently torn in pieces by Maenads.) In a quest for personal wholeness the Delphic oracle advised 'γνωθι σεαυτον *(gnothi seauton):* know yourself'. That may require a difficult going down into the darkness, to acknowledge what is there: the hurts you have suffered, the things you have done, so that these are not repressed but brought back up and reincorporated into your full self-awareness.

In the Philippians poem Christ Jesus pours out his whole self, from his fullness, into humanity. In the 'Harrowing of Hell' scene in *Piers Plowman* Jesus challenges the Devil, the 'Doctor of Death' by declaring: 'I that am Lord of Life, love is my drink and for that drink today I died upon Earth.' Paul advises his readers to imitate this massive generosity. Pouring yourself out in meeting others, in love and work, expressing yourself, giving of your fullness, is life. Life against death.

The poet John Keats found periods of darkness – a sort of mini-death – necessary in order to create a new poem, a living body of words. He called it 'Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. On another occasion he spoke of 'straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness.'

People can endure many mini-deaths throughout life and then get back on their feet again to carry on. Even falling asleep is a (often pleasant) mini-death and waking to a new day a mini resurrection. The painful glory of human beings is that they may keep on doing this, keep pouring their spirit without stint, even though one day each person will die forever to make way for the next generation.

Adam the Second

After experience

Oh God what a self-righteous prat I was!
In saying 'Oh God', I'm not invoking you, God,
but rather, something in me that desires
I don't know what – not to be stupid –

infantile, kicking against the pricks.
Rather, to understand the pricks, how they
come to be. Not from a God 'out there' who makes
rules about trees arbitrarily,

but from an inward, an aesthetic sense
of how, in a fallen world, there should be, is,
something to redeem experience –
maybe you, God, dying with us on a cross.

Of all the stories that we tell ourselves
to make sense of experience, maybe
that one comes closest to a truth, resolves
most questions, touches us most nearly.

So if I feel regret, it's not for loss
but something not yet found, a how-to-be
that is not only moral but which has
the fierce joy of living gloriously.

Nicholas Bielby