A Textual Commentary on Philippians 2.5-11*

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Of all the books on my shelf relating to New Testament textual criticism, none is in more constant use than Bruce M. Metzger’s *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. I welcome the invitation to honor Professor Metzger, and follow the lead he has given in this commentary.

Philippians 2.5-11 is one of the most studied passages in the Bible. The secondary literature on the section is enormous, and continues to grow. Therefore anyone who seeks to add to this volume of literature must give a very good reason for doing so. The purpose of this commentary is to argue that the textual variations in the passage have largely been ignored in the interpretive task, and that they offer fresh material and new possibilities for interpretation.

Despite all the scholarly attention given to Phil. 2.5-11, there has been a relative neglect of the textual variations. This may be because most scholars would echo the sentiments of J.-F. Collange, who stated: ‘The text is certain; variants are few and unimportant’ (1979: 81). But a growing attention to the textual variations in Phil. 2.5-11, and their significance for exegesis, may be seen by comparing the four editions of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament. The first three editions list only one variation (2.5, τοῦ το γάρ). The fourth edition (1993) lists four variations in the passage, indicating a growing awareness that the textual variations may be important for interpretation and translation. But a glance at the 27th edition of Nestle/Aland reveals that there are still more variations within the passage, some of which may also be significant for the interpretive task. Tischendorf’s eighth edition lists yet more variations. The following textual commentary will consider the important variations in this passage. I believe that several of them may offer fresh material and perspective for interpretive issues in the passage that continue to be debated. The overall impression is that the textual variations need to be much more closely considered in the task of biblical interpretation. They are not merely to be considered in establishing the text that is then interpreted. They are themselves integral to the task of interpretation.

Most scholars assume that the Paul is quoting here from an early Christian hymn although there have been some dissenters (Fee 1995: 40-43). This study adopts the majority view that the passage represents a pre-Pauline rhetorical composition. This assumption has an important bearing on several of the variations that we will examine.

1. Philippians 2.5 — τοῦ το] add γάρ. Although Fee (1995: 179) asserts that ‘the asyndetal text has by far the best support’, the evidence is fairly evenly divided, with Θ A B on the side of omission, P46 D on the side of inclusion. Silva (2005: 112) argues that γάρ must be original, since

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it has the support of P⁴⁶ and the ‘Western’ text. O’Brien (1998) suggested that its omission may have been accidental, or an early Alexandrian attempt to improve the style. Later additions of οὖν and καί are also attempts at smoother style. It is possible that the γάρ fell out through lectionary use, although Metzger (1994: 613) notes that the omission would antedate the use of lectionaries. Whether we follow Fee and omit the γάρ or we follow Silva and include it, we note that the variation is significant for the interpretation of v. 5.

There has been much debate in recent decades over the relationship of the ‘hymn’ (if indeed it is a hymn) in Phil. 2.6-11 to the letter. Is the passage by Paul or someone else? How are the vocabulary and themes of the passage related to the rest of Philippians, and especially to Paul’s autobiography in ch. 3? Many have noted linguistic and thematic links between the hymn and the letter. But recently Brian Dodd has raised some important questions along this line (Dodd 1998). Verbal links have perhaps been overemphasized. If γάρ is what Paul wrote, it strengthens the link between the ‘hymn’ and the letter.

Another avenue of approach, since manuscripts and interpreters are divided, is to consider the use of γάρ elsewhere in Philippians. We find 13 other instances in the letter (two of which are textually uncertain). Considering Paul’s regular use of γάρ, and the fact that scribes habitually cut down on the use of connecting words like γάρ, δὲ, οὖν and καί, and so on. I believe that γάρ originally stood in the text.

2. Philippians 2.5 — φρονεῖτε φρονεῖσθω. The passive form is read by the majority of later manuscripts, which is reflected in the KJV: ‘Let this mind be in you...’ But the earliest witnesses read the active φρονεῖτε, which is followed by modern editors, and is rendered in the RSV as ‘Have this mind among yourselves...’ Hawthorne argued that the passive is original, but has not had a following. Martin in his revision of Hawthorne opts for φρονεῖτε (Hawthorne and Martin 2004: 106). The earlier commentator, H.C.G. Moule, cited the following as supporting φρονεῖσθω: C³ K₂ L P, most cursives, cop arm goth Origen Euseb Basil Chrys, noting ‘the ail-but unanimity of the cursives and the Greek patristic evidence, gives φρονεῖσθω a strong case’ (1897:32).

The importance of this textual question for exegesis cannot be overstated. The decision affects the precise nature of the relationship of Christology and ethics in the epistle. On this issue, R.B. Hays wrote that ‘the paradigmatic significance of Jesus’ death is most fully developed in Philippians, where the “Christ-hymn” of Phil. 2.6-11 becomes the centerpiece of the letter’ (1996: 28). Hays noted Kasemann’s rejection of any ethical interpretation that involved an imitation of Christ’s act because it depended on a rigid one-to-one correspondence between example and imitator. Hays takes another tack. He writes:

If we adopt a more supple notion of metaphorical correspondence, the dissimilarities between Christ and his people are to be expected, because metaphor always posits a startling likeness between unlike entities. In Philippians, Paul offers a metaphorical reading of Christ’s self-emptying and death; the power of metaphor is precisely a function of its daring improbability, inviting the readers to see their own lives and vocations as corresponding to the gracious action of the Lord whom they acclaim in their worship.
Consequently, the decision of the NRSV translation committee to return to the ‘exemplar’ interpretation is to be welcomed. ‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (1996: 30).

Hays’ observation offers a real advance. However, it suffers, as does his whole study, which is otherwise excellent, from a major flaw: the almost total neglect of text-critical questions and their relevance for exegesis.

φρονεῖν is a key word in Philippians. Wayne Meeks has noted that the verb φρονεῖν occurs ten times in this short letter (two occurrences involve a textual variation) and relates to Paul’s use of φρόνησις, ‘practical reasoning’, an important concept in Greco-Roman philosophy. Meeks argued that ‘the letter’s most comprehensive purpose is the shaping of a Christian phronesis, a practical moral reasoning that is conformed to Christ’s death in hope of his resurrection’ (Meeks 2002: 109-10; Fowl 1998: 145). But Meeks’ essay presses for a more precise understanding of this phronesis. Does it refer to straight imitation or to a more paradigmatic living out of the phronesis Christ displayed? Most students would argue the latter. But for this interpretation the passive (φρονεῖσθαι, ‘Let this mind be in you...’) is better suited than the active (φρονεῖε, ‘Have this mind among yourselves...’), offering ‘a more supple notion of metaphor’. We note that the NRSV, based on the text of UBS3/Nestle 26, translates φρονεῖε as ‘Let the same mind be in you...’ (TNIV, ‘Have the same attitude of mind...’). But this rendering implies the reading φρονεῖσθαι! The text-critical questions seems to be still very much alive, and our decision here affects our understanding of the whole tone of the letter. This is all the more so, since v. 5 has been called the ‘linchpin of the whole argument of 1.27-2.18’ (Bockmeuhl 1998: 121).

Peter O’Brein, in assessing Hawthorne’s argument that φρονεῖσθαι is the original reading, believes that his choice and re-construction (following Lightfoot) extracts a heavy cost, ‘namely accepting an inferior text’ (O’Brien 1991: 255). However, it is to be noted that on a number of occasions the UBS committee has felt compelled to opt for the ‘inferior text’ because the context or other considerations demand it, for example, Rom. 5.1 (Rodgers 1992: 391). Philippians 2.5, φρονεῖσθαι may be another instance where such a textual decision is warranted. At the very least, it should be featured in UBS 5.

3. Philippians 2.7—ἀνθρώπου] ἀνθρώπων. This is an interesting and very early textual variation. We find it in the Alexandrian (P46) and ‘Western’ (Marcion) textual traditions before 200 CE. It does not appear in the apparatus of any edition of the UBS Greek New Testament. However, in both editions of the Textual Commentary accompanying those volumes, Bruce Metzger wrote:

Instead of ἀνθρώπων several early witnesses read ἀνθρώπου (P46 syr b pal Cop sa bo Marcion Origen Cyprian Hilary Ambrose). Although it is possible that the Adam-Christ typology implicit in the passage accounts for the substitution, it is more likely that the singular number is merely a non-doctrinal conformation to the singular δούλος and the following ἀνθρώπος (1994: 545-46).

Most commentators concur with Metzger, contending that the plural was changed as ‘a non-doctrinal conformation to the singular’. All are agreed that Paul wrote the plural, ἀνθρώπων, but there is much debate about the background of Paul’s Christology in Philippians 2. Reviewing the
variety of suggestions that have been offered, L.D. Hurst stated, ‘The two valid possibilities that remain are Adam and the servant’ (1998: 91). It is likely that Paul was influenced by both Genesis 1-3 and Isa. 52.13-53.12. But for the particular phrase under review, ἐν ὁμοίωματι ἀνθρώπων, another passage from the Hebrew Bible calls for consideration. It is surprising that more attention has not been paid to Ezekiel 1, in which in the LXX ὁμοίωμα is a key word. We note especially two verses:

Ezek. 1.5 ὁμοίωμα ἀνθρώπων.
Ezek. 1.28 (LXX 2.1) αὕτη ἡ ὀράσις ὁμοίωματος δόξης κυρίου.

Taken together, these expressions, ‘the likeness of a man’, and ‘This is the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord’ serve well as a background for the expression ἐν ὁμοίωματι ἀνθρώπων. But in Ezekiel we note that ἀνθρώπων is singular, the form we find in P, Marcion, and so on. The whole passage, Ezekiel 1, may shed light on other expressions in the ‘hymn’, especially in v. 11, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’.

The importance of Ezekiel 1 for understanding the Philippians ‘hymn’ was suggested by Michel (1954) and cited approvingly by R.P. Martin (1967: 205-206). Michel wrote that Ezekiel employs the artifice of the ὁμοίωμα-formula to preserve the element of the numinous and the otherworldly. He called it ‘the Epiphany style’, and believed that accounted for the terminology in the ‘Christ Hymn’.

These observations may offer some insight into the origin of the variation. An early Jewish Christian copyist (before 150 CE) who knew (perhaps from memory) the LXX of Ezekiel 1, could have easily changed the plural in Phil. 2.7, ἐν ὁμοίωματι ἀνθρώπων, to the singular, ἐν ὁμοίωματι ἀνθρώπων, under the influence of Ezek. 1.5, ὁμοίωμα ἀνθρώπων. But I suspect that something else may have led to the textual variation. If Phil. 2.6-11 had an independent life as a hymn (perhaps written by Paul), it is possible that the pre-Philippians version had read the singular ἀνθρώπων, and when Paul incorporated the hymn in the letter, he changed the word to the plural ἀνθρώπων. It is likely that the hymn would have continued to be sung in the early church long after Paul had adapted it for use in Philippians. So, two versions would have circulated at the same time.

Whatever merit there may be to this suggested history of the text, it is clear at least that the singular reading, ἀνθρώπων, alerts us to an additional element in the background of this most important passage in the Christology of the New Testament.

4. Philippians 2.8—μέχρι ἄρχειν: The change in Mss D*FG may have been made in the interest of better style. Smythe (1982: 504) notes that although μέχρι is found in classical writers, the form is avoided by the Attic orators. Atticism may then be suspected as the motive for the change. We note the same variation in Phil. 3.30, the only other occurrence of μέχρι in the letter. There D E F G read ἔως. This substitution is also found in Mt. 28.15, Mk 13.30 and Lk. 16.16. ἄρχειν is found in Gal. 4.19 in X C D, and so on, and both alternatives to μέχρι at Mt. 13.30.
5. Philippians 2.9—τὸ ὄνομα] ὄνομα. Modern discussion of this variation began with J.B. Lightfoot, who noted that the reading τὸ ὄνομα (for which the received text has ὄνομα without the article) is unquestionably correct, both as having the support of the oldest Mss, and as giving a much fuller meaning. J.B. Lightfoot believed that translators and transcribers have stumbled at the expression in several places and inserted words to explain it (Acts 5.41; Ignatius, Eph. 3, Philad. 10); ‘The same motive will account for the omission of the article here’ (1900: 114).

This is the one textual variation from Phil. 2.5-11 which Bart D. Ehrman mentions in his important study, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (1993). Ehrman argued that under pressure in their controversies with Patrapassianiats (who too closely identified the Father and the Son), orthodox scribes changed the text of Phil. 2.9. This change is reflected in witnesses as early as the Alexandrian fathers, Clement and Origen, along with a number of Western and Byzantine manuscripts. Ehrman argued:

> By eliminating the article these witnesses state that Christ was given ‘a name’ that is above all others. Although not to be identified as the Father, Christ is made Lord of all else (1993: 268).

Ehrman might as readily have argued that an original ὄνομα was changed by an orthodox scribe to the τὸ ὄνομα of P 46 决定了 BC 33 629 1175 1739 pc, in order to assert the full divinity of Jesus Christ in the face of those early heretics who denied Jesus’ equality with the Father. Not infrequently Ehrman’s examples can be argued both ways, so to speak, where he envisions orthodox scribes prepared to change the text to counter a variety of different heretical movements.

It is more likely that what has happened here is an unintentional alteration. This is suggested by Bruce Metzger in his *Textual Commentary*:

> While the article before ὄνομα may have been inserted in order to assimilate the expression to a more usual one, it is also possible that the last syllable of ἐχαρίσατο somehow led to the omission of the article (1994: 546).

Many of Ehrman’s examples can be explained trot as intentional doctrinal corrections but as accidental mistakes in copying (e.g. haplography, dittography, homoioteleuton, assimilation). Once this very early unintentional change (prior to 200 C.E.) entered the textual stream, orthodox scribes may have been faced with a choice of the two, and chosen the stronger. But here we are dealing with the choice of readings rather than the intentional creation of readings.

The earliest Patristic witness for the reading without the article is Clement from Theodotus. The *Excerpta ex Theodoto* are fragments of Theodotus the Cobbler, a heretical teacher who flourished at the end of the second century. Theodotus and his followers were the first to claim that Jesus was ‘completely and only human...a mere man (μιλός ἄνθρωπος)’ (Ehrman 1993: 51-52). It is not surprising, therefore, that Theodotus should read ὄνομα rather than τὸ ὄνομα.

But the origin of the variation is likely earlier than the late second century, and should be sought, as Lightfoot suggested, in the reluctance of early Jewish-Christian monotheism to
translate or even pronounce the ineffable name. In all Christian Mss of the lxx and its
dependents, and the New Testament, this became κύριος, but doubt continues about Jewish Mss
of the LXX. The origin of the variation may be traceable to the pre-Pauline stage of the hymn
which Paul took over and made his own, changing ὄνομα to τὸ ὄνομα.

6. Philippians 2.11—ἐξομολογήσηται ἐξομολογήσεται. The UBS committee gave their decision
regarding this textual variation—a (C) rating—indicating that they had difficulty deciding which
variant to place in the text. The first two editions had the future, the third and fourth the
subjunctive. But no apparatus or discussion was given in UBS till the fourth edition.

Here is a complicated and interesting textual question. Did Paul write the subjunctive or the
future? The decision has important interpretive and theological implications, and translators must
not dodge the issue as did the TNIV, which reads: ‘...and every tongue acknowledge’.

Commentators have noted that the manuscript evidence is evenly divided. No decision as to
what Paul wrote should be made without addressing a number of questions:

1. If Paul is citing a hymn, what did it read?
2. What is the relevance of the textual variation in LXX Isa. 45.23?
3. Did Paul use a targum?
4. What is the relationship of Phil. 2.11 to Rom. 14.11 (cf. the variations at Rom. 14.10, 12)?
5. Is the textual change at Phil. 2.11 accidental or intentional?
6. Are there internal, stylistic considerations?
7. Was the text of Phil. 2.11 assimilated to either Rom. 14.11 or Isa. 45.23?

We observe that the text of Rom. 14.11 is secure, and that there Paul wrote two futures, κἀµψει
πᾶν γόνυ and καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται. In the Philippians hymn, κἀµψει is changed to a
subjunctive, κἀµψῃ. It is likely that if Paul changed the first future to subjunctive, he also
changed the second. This concurs with Fee’s judgment that Phil. 2.11 read the subjunctive,
preserving Paul’s chiastic style (1995: 218 n. 2). But why did Paul change the future of the LXX
to the subjunctive?

One of Paul’s purposes in this passage, and especially in this letter, was to assert that Jesus is
Lord and Caesar is not. N.T. Wright has noted of Phil. 2.6-11, ‘The poem was formulated to
make a specific contrast with the rhetorical claims of Caesar’ (2003: 233). P. Oakes stated
regarding Philippians, ‘Christ, not the emperor was now the true figure of authority’ (2001: 170).
So, submission to Christ’s lordship was not just a matter for the future at Christ’s parousia, but a
matter for the present, made urgent by the reality that God has already highly exalted Jesus and
bestowed on him the name that is above every name. The future is now!

The textual variant ἐξομολογήσεται, then, could have arisen as an assimilation by a later
scribe to the text of either Rom. 14.11 or the AQS text of LXX Isa. 45.11. But caution has
recently been urged regarding the argument from assimilation in textual decisions (see Holmes
1990). Alternately, it is possible that the alteration occurred because epsilon and eta were inter-
changeable in the post-classical period, as attested in the papyri (R.P. Martin 1967:266). But it is also possible that ἐξομολογήσεται was in the hymn that Paul adapted and made his own, and that the hymn continued to circulate in the worship of the early church, its readings surfacing sporadically in the New Testament manuscript tradition.

7. Philippians 2.11—κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός κύριος Ἰησοῦς // Χριστός κύριος. Scribes tended to add rather than subtract divine names. B.M. Metzger and B.D. Ehrman (2005: 263-64) give a good example of this in the growth of the unadorned Ἰησοῦς in Gal. 6.17 (P16 B A C * f) through various additions to the full κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστοῦ of Dgr* G Sy² Goth Chrysostom Victorinus Epiphanius. But external evidence for the fuller form at Phil. 2.11, κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, is so strong that most commentators do not even mention the variation.

How, then, do we explain the genesis of the two alternatives? Χριστός κύριος of manuscript K is a singular reading and may be safely disregarded. κύριος Ἰησοῦς is another matter, occurring in several Greek Mss, versions and a number of Church Fathers. This is the Pauline creedal formula of Rom. 10.9 and 1 Cor. 12.3, and is thoroughly “Pauline. Had it stronger external support in Phil. 2.11, it probably would be given serious consideration. In any case, it needs to be explained, not simply ignored.

In Rom. 10.9 and 1 Cor. 12.3 Paul is citing a creedal formula common in the earliest church. It may be that this formula was also in the hymn Paul was quoting in Philippians 2, and that in adapting the hymn Paul used the fuller form κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. Subsequently the simpler form did not immediately die out, but survived as the hymn continued to be used, and is preserved in elements of the manuscript tradition.

Conclusion

The judgment of Collange, cited at the beginning of this study, will not stand when the variations in the passage are carefully studied. The textual variations in Phil. 2.5-11 have an important bearing on the critical issues of interpretation. To include γάρ in v. 5 is to establish an even closer link between the hymn and the letter than is apparent on other grounds. Our decision on the form of φρονεῖν in v. 5 affects the precise nature of the ethical appeal being made on the basis of Christ’s obedience. Most commentators see Adam-Christ imagery in the hymn, a reference made more specific by ἀνθρώπου in 2.7. Paul’s ἀνθρώπων gives a broader application to humanity. Reference to ‘the name’ rather than ‘a name’ in v. 9 shows the high Christology of Paul in applying the name, status and authority accorded to YHWH in the Old Testament to Jesus. That exaltation and naming, envisioned as something that all would confess in the future, is a present reality, as shown by Paul’s use of the subjunctive in 2.11, instead of the future indicative of lxx Isa. 45.23. This constitutes a direct challenge to the rival claims of Caesar. Moreover, the confession ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ gives fuller expression to the earliest Christian creed, ‘Jesus is Lord’. All these issues are engaged by the textual variations in the passage, which in turn may
offer insight into the theology of the Apostle Paul. If some of the variants originated in the pre-Pauline hymn, as I am arguing for points 3, 5, 6, and 7 above, they offer us a rare opportunity to overhear Paul as he thinks through the implications of the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus the Messiah. Paul quoted a familiar hymn, making slight but significant changes, in the interest of a higher Christology (points 5, 7), a universal application of Jesus’ obedient humanity (cf. Rom. 5.19—point 3) and an affirmation that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord (points 5, 6, 7).

**Bibliography**
