

WHEN TRADITION IS A TRAP:
REVISITING THE PURPOSE OF PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

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April 7, 2017

Stone-Campbell Journal Conference

Traditions are hard to escape. Longstanding traditions can undergird our thought processes subconsciously. In the church, tradition guides the ways scripture is expounded and taught, so that often one hears a particular passage explained in much the same way time and time again. While this might not be inherently wrong, traditions can inhibit biblical interpretation by preventing exegetes from viewing scripture in different ways. In some cases, tradition can in fact perpetuate exegetical imbalances. I contend that such an imbalance is evidenced in the way that preachers and teachers tend to approach Philippians 2:1-11. This well-known passage begins with a series of practical exhortations and then moves into the famous “Christ hymn,” which treats Christ’s incarnation, suffering, and ultimate exaltation. The latter portion of the passage has been the subject of innumerable sermons, books, and commentaries, and may be one of the most discussed texts in the New Testament.¹ However, this second portion of the text is rarely viewed in context, but is separated from its original function of powerfully illustrating the previous exhortation.

This persistent division of the text is the result of the pattern of its interpretation throughout church history, further reinforced during the early Trinitarian Controversies of the fourth century.² In order to substantiate this argument, I will begin by briefly discussing the grammatical unity of this passage, then I will survey the potential reasons it was often exegetically divided and how two unique exegetes, Ambrosiaster and John Chrysostom, managed to situate the Christ hymn in its literary context.

¹ Bonnie B. Thurston, *Philippians and Philemon*, Sacra Pagina 10 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 85.

² While the Trinitarian Controversies certainly cemented the divided interpretation of this passage, individuals such as Origen also conformed to this interpretation before this time period.

EXEGETICAL CONTINUITY

The purpose of Philippians 2:1-11 is to exhort the Philippian Christians to unity and to provide instruction on how to attain that unity. In verses 1-4, Paul expounds on the attitudes and behaviors which either prevent or promote this unity. Paul urges the Philippians to “regard others above” themselves, adopting an attitude of humility. It is apparent from these exhortations that humility is essential to the pursuit of unity.

Verse 5, “This should be your mindset, which was also Christ Jesus’ attitude,”³ serves as a transition from instruction to demonstration. “This” (τοῦτο) refers to the preceding material and connects Paul’s exhortations with the example of Jesus, the embodiment of the qualities listed in the previous verses.⁴ The grammatical function of this transitional statement leaves no doubt that the subsequent material is intended to serve the former imperatives to unity and humility. Clearly, Paul is continuing to teach on this topic through the following illustration, rather than writing a theological treatise. While the following hymn has been used extensively throughout church history for the development of Christological and Trinitarian doctrine, this was not Paul’s *primary* purpose for its inclusion. The specific purpose of this hymn is to influence the mindset and behavior of the letter’s readers and hearers by providing an irrefutable illustration of Paul’s exhortations in verses 1-4. Through the example of Christ’s behavior, Paul is challenging the Philippians to the highest form of humility and self-sacrifice. Thus, while the rest of this passage provides extensive teaching concerning Christ and his incarnation, it should also be read for the primary purpose of inspiring imitation and emulation.

³ Author’s translation throughout.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 199.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is noteworthy that verses 1-4 have so often been exegetically separated from verses 5-11. This exegetical division has its roots in church history, especially being bolstered in the fourth century Trinitarian Controversies. At that time, many church fathers were committed to overturning the arguments of those, like the Arians, who denied the full divinity of Christ.⁵ In this climate, texts like Philippians 2:6-11 were vitally relevant, regardless of their original context. And certainly, none could be blamed for utilizing passages like these for polemical purposes; after all, they contain invaluable material concerning Christ's incarnation and relation to the Father. Accordingly, while the passage was sometimes divided previously (by key exegetes such as Origen), during this time this interpretation of the text was further reinforced.

The problem is that this approach persisted in following generations. The theological importance of the passage overwhelmed its contextual function even beyond the heat of controversy, as evidenced in subsequent writings and theological works. Because this passage became a Trinitarian touchstone, it was difficult for subsequent exegetes to view this passage in its original context.

However, a few commentators managed to note the illustrative function of the passage along with its theological import. John Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster are essentially alone among the early church fathers in holistically treating verses 1-11.⁶ While each of them also covers doctrinal topics in their comments, they are almost the only individuals contemporary with the Trinitarian Controversies to provide any detailed exegesis on verses 1-4. While it is

⁵ Manlio Simonetti, "Arius – Arianism," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 236.

⁶ This statement refers to the patristic period, and it should be noted that Marius Victorinus also systematically treated this passage in his commentary on Philippians; however, his work was not accessible for this project because it has not been translated into any modern languages.

interesting that a partial exegesis became normative for this passage, it is even more curious that two exegetes managed to maintain the integrity of the pericope.

So what was it that allowed Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster to take this view of the passage? Both were influenced by one of the two prevailing schools of exegetical thought at this time. Scriptural exegesis was dominated by the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools of thought, which derived meaning from scripture in different ways.⁷ Alexandrian exegetes, such as Origen, viewed scripture through an allegorical lens, seeking to plumb the depths of theological meaning, and were not always concerned with the coherence of their texts.⁸ By contrast, Antiochene exegetes were concerned with the integrity of the Bible's overarching narrative, making their method of exegesis more literal and morally focused.⁹ While the Alexandrians saw no problem in using allegory (which derives meaning from scripture that is unrelated to its historical content), the Antiochenes argued that conclusions should be drawn in light of the facts presented in the text and should not violate the narrative continuity of scripture.¹⁰ Thus, one of the key distinctions between the two approaches was the Antiochene emphasis on the coherence of the text resulting in moral and doctrinal instruction.¹¹

Both Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster conformed to the Antiochene style of exegesis, which had specific implications for their treatment of Philippians 2:1-11. Chrysostom, being a native of Antioch, naturally conformed to this interpretational method.¹² Though Ambrosiaster was not located near Antioch and was a Latin commentator, his style of exegesis nevertheless

⁷ Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 162-164, 167. However, the Antiochene and Alexandrian interpretations were similar in many ways; for example, they both sought to intellectualize scripture through typology and allegory, incorporating deductive reasoning as a part of their exegesis.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154, 176-177.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹² Wilhelm Geerlings, "John Chrysostom," in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*; ed. Siegmund Dopp and Wilhelm Geerlings; trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 330.

reflected the Antiochene method.¹³ Although none of the Alexandrian exegetes treated verses 1-4 in their commentaries and treatises, the Antiochene influence on Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster encouraged them to move systematically through the entire passage. Because there is no allegory to be drawn from the straightforward imperatives in verses 1-4, Alexandrian exegetes generally did not expound upon these verses in their commentaries. Rather, these verses were often used as supporting material for sermons on other passages and on topics like humility, or in commentaries on other epistles. Conversely, Antiochenes were more likely to systematically exegete entire books, comprehensively treating each passage and attempting to maintain the coherence of the text.¹⁴

Another factor that encouraged Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster to discuss the entire passage was the purpose of their exegeses. Both Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster commented on scripture for the practical purpose of Christian living, Chrysostom through his sermons, Ambrosiaster through his commentary. Neither wrote theological treatises for the purpose of expounding upon the beliefs of the church; rather, they were concerned with the implications of scripture for everyday life.¹⁵ For this reason, while their contemporaries (even other Antiochenes) were writing Trinitarian polemics based on this passage, Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster discussed the text's implications for discipleship alongside their theological comments.

¹³ Charles Kannengieser, "Ambrosiaster," *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1081-1082, and Alexander Souter, "Ambrosiaster," *The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul: A Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64-65. Ambrosiaster's Antiochene tendencies contributed to his misidentification as Ambrose of Milan. As mentioned, the name "Ambrosiaster" was coined by Erasmus, since Ambrosiaster's commentary was published anonymously.

¹⁴ Though it should be noted that other Antiochenes who were more heavily embroiled in the Trinitarian Controversies (such as Augustine) did not treat the passage systematically.

¹⁵ Geerlings, "John Chrysostom," 334; Kannengieser, "Ambrosiaster," 1082.

While some¹⁶ state that this practical approach makes figures such as Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster unimportant exegetes in the history of the church, I argue that in the context of this passage their literal approach allows them to interpret the passage more closely to its intended meaning. Clearly, for Paul there was no divide between a theology of Christ and practical instruction. Especially in this passage, pointed instruction and complex theology are intertwined, working together to provide practical instruction to the Philippians. Rather than rendering their exegeses inconsequential, the plain, pragmatic exegetical method of Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster allowed them to come closer to the intended meaning and purpose of the passage.

By noting the ways in which Ambrosiaster and Chrysostom interpreted and applied these texts, we can gain a better understanding of their approaches and ideas concerning this passage, specifically regarding the connection between pragmatics and theology in this text.

AMBROSIASTER

Ambrosiaster has been a rather obscure figure in patristic scholarship, his works having long been attributed to Ambrose.¹⁷ He was dubbed “Ambrosiaster” by Erasmus, and while debates have proliferated concerning his identity, it is clear that he was a prominent fourth century layman in the church.¹⁸ Ambrosiaster’s commentary was published anonymously, hence his misidentification as Ambrose.¹⁹ His commentary is based on common sense and straightforward logic, and he is concerned with clearly communicating the content of Paul’s epistles.²⁰

¹⁶ E.g. Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1994), 74.

¹⁷ Wilhelm Geerlings, “Ambrosiaster,” in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*; ed. Siegmund Dopf and Wilhelm Geerlings; trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 20.

¹⁸ Charles Kannengieser, “Ambrosiaster,” *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1081.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 1082.

Ambrosiaster's commentary on Philippians 2:1-11 intertwines theology and notes on Christian living. He begins his discussion by noting the incentive that Paul is attempting to provide for the Philippians in verses 1-4.²¹ He then moves into a theological focus in his notes on verses 5-6 and is clearly concerned with properly understanding the statement that Christ was "in the form of God."²²

His discussion of verses 7-8 provides a blend of theology and pragmatics.²³ While asserting the facts of Christ's incarnation, Ambrosiaster points out that the purpose of Christ's actions was to illustrate true humility. He notes that, through this exposition of the incarnation, Paul is encouraging his audience to emulate the behaviors and attitudes of Jesus. For Ambrosiaster, this type of living entails not only refusing to assert ourselves over others, but further choosing to submit ourselves to those around us. He then moves into a more detailed discussion of what "form" Christ took in his incarnation and the duality of his nature.

Ambrosiaster begins his comments on verses 9-11 by noting that Paul's purpose is to exhibit the result of Christ's humility in order to provide incentive for resisting haughtiness and pursuing this ideal.²⁴ After these comments, Ambrosiaster proceeds to discuss the various theological issues raised by these verses, including the "name above all names," the meaning of Christ's exaltation, and the tension between Christ's divinity and humanity.²⁵

Ambrosiaster's brief and pointed comments on this passage illustrate the connections between the former and latter halves of the text, while also exposing his Trinitarian ideas. While

²¹ Ambrosiaster, *Ancient Christian Texts: Commentaries on Galatians-Philemon*; ed. Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray; trans. Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 68.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70-72. This discussion highlights the challenges of Trinitarian doctrine for Ambrosiaster, as his line of reasoning and his arguments become rather muddled. Ambrosiaster does not seem to fully grasp Christ's humanity or the duality of his nature. This passage offers him particular difficulty as he wrestles with the meaning and implications of Christ's exaltation. For further information, see Alexander Souter, "Ambrosiaster," *The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul: A Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 79.

he is careful to point out the theological importance of this passage, he is also attentive to drawing practical lessons from the text. He couples Paul's admonitions with the exemplary model of Christ and articulates the necessity of imitating that model for his audience.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Ambrosiaster's obscurity is fittingly balanced by the prominence of John Chrysostom. Chrysostom was a presbyter in Antioch and later a bishop in Constantinople, and was one of the most prolific preachers in the history of the church.²⁶ He preached three sermons based on various sections of this passage, giving us ample examples of how he viewed and applied this text.

Homily 6 in his series on Philippians is based on Philippians 2:1-4. After establishing the purpose of the initial phrases, Chrysostom engages in straightforward teaching upon humility and unity.²⁷ He works through these verses phrase by phrase, attempting to instill in his congregation how Paul's commands should be manifest in their lives. For Chrysostom, arrogance is the "cause of all evils," and he is eager to help his congregation avoid this pitfall.²⁸ He is especially concerned that they understand the significance of considering others superior to themselves.²⁹ According to Chrysostom, this attitude is vital in the cause of humility and unity, because it provides a safeguard against jealousy and strife and is an essential mindset in a unified and peaceful congregation.³⁰

Chrysostom then turns his attention to providing examples, both positive and negative. He notes the humility of individuals like Joseph and Daniel, who did not accept for themselves

²⁶ Charles Kannengieser, "John Chrysostom," *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 783.

²⁷ John Chrysostom, "Homily 6," in *John Chrysostom, Homilies on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*; trans. Pauline Allen (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 99-103.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

the glory of interpreting dreams.³¹ But the example of humility to which he appeals most extensively is the apostle Paul. He includes several quotations from the epistles which demonstrate Paul's humility, clearly encouraging his congregation to imitate it.³² Interestingly, while Paul himself provides the ultimate illustration of humility in the following verses, Chrysostom never mentions Christ as an example. Rather, he chooses to utilize other biblical characters to depict this quality, leaving verses 1-4 noticeably distinct from the rest of the pericope. It seems odd that Chrysostom would go to the pains of illustrating his sermon with several biblical figures while leaving out the individual whom Paul himself chose to demonstrate humility. Throughout Chrysostom's writings, he often particularly prefers to use Paul as an illustration rather than Christ.³³ For Chrysostom, Paul seems to have been a more accessible example to his congregations because he was not divine.³⁴ This tendency is largely at play in this homily, since Chrysostom notes many human examples, all the while refraining from mentioning the ultimate demonstration of humility by Christ.

Homily 7 focuses on verses 5-8 and is largely theological in nature. However, Chrysostom begins this sermon by stating that Christ made himself an example of humility for his disciples and subsequent Christians to follow, as did Paul.³⁵ After these brief comments, Chrysostom launches into a systematic rebuttal against a myriad of Trinitarian heretics, claiming that this passage slays their arguments.³⁶ It is apparent through this careful treatment of heretical doctrine that Chrysostom believes accurate theology is vital to his congregation. Following his

³¹ Ibid., 105.

³² Ibid., 107-109.

³³ Margaret Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 396.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ John Chrysostom, "Homily 7," in *John Chrysostom, Homilies on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*; trans. Pauline Allen (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 113.

³⁶ Ibid., 113-121.

treatment of the various heretics and heresies, he notes that true humility is not the humility of necessity, but the humility of choice.³⁷ He admonishes his congregations that those who are forced to be humble by their circumstances are not to be praised, rather those, such as Christ, who have cause to be arrogant and choose humility instead.³⁸ Thus, through the course of this homily we see a mixture of theology and practical instruction similar to that of Ambrosiaster's commentary. Chrysostom moves freely between his comments on humility and his exposition of theology, being comfortable in frequently juxtaposing the two topics.

Homily 8 provides comment on verses 5-11, showing some overlap with the previous homily. Having thoroughly discussed in Homily 7 views he deemed heretical, Chrysostom proceeds to discuss the orthodox views of this passage.³⁹ In the midst of these comments, he specifically notes the connection between Christ's emptying and the preceding phrase, "regarding others above yourselves." In the course of a continuing discussion concerning heretical and orthodox positions, he also states that God's becoming man is the utmost act of humility.⁴⁰ But the focus of these comments on humility is predominately theological in nature, intended to strengthen Chrysostom's orthodox arguments. Following a thorough exegesis of verses 9-11, Chrysostom returns to the practical implications of this passage in terms of humility.⁴¹ Once more, Chrysostom provides both negative and positive examples, particularly setting Satan and Paul in opposition to one another.⁴² Here again we see Chrysostom's tendency to turn to Paul when seeking a pattern to follow.

³⁷ Ibid., 121.

³⁸ Ibid., 121-123.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, "Homily 8," in *John Chrysostom, Homilies on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*; trans. Pauline Allen (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 141-157.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁴¹ Ibid., 157-161.

⁴² Ibid., 157-159.

In these sermons, Chrysostom's desire to disciple his congregation is apparent. As he seeks to promote discipleship through this passage, he employs both practical exhortation and theological instruction. For Chrysostom, both are necessary when interpreting the passage. He intermingles these approaches quite closely, more so even than Ambrosiaster. Chrysostom flows freely between moral instruction and doctrinal explanation, seeming to consider them both logical and necessary results of carefully exegeting this passage.

A PURPOSEFUL PURSUIT

But is it important to view Philippians 2:1-11 in this way? Is there really anything lost by exegetically dividing this passage? While much can be gleaned from the Christ hymn in its own right, the moral application that can be found in the passage's original context is equally valuable. Certainly, the Christ hymn provides important theological teaching, but these theological ideas should not overpower the passage's original purpose of fostering discipleship. Indeed, no more powerful and effective illustration of humility can be found in scripture. Thus, it is an exegetical loss not to acknowledge and consider the implications of these verses in their intended function. In light of its exegetical context, I believe that, like Ambrosiaster and Chrysostom, the best way to approach this passage is a both/and method. By exploring the theology found in verses 6-11 and connecting that theology to the preceding exhortations, we can gain the fullest sense of the passage's meaning. By fully understanding the illustration of Christ's suffering and exaltation, we can thoroughly grasp the practical and moral implications of humility.