

THE IMPRESSION OF THE FIGURE: To Know Jesus as Christ

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How did the first Christians understand Jesus? Let us approach the question of the impression that Jesus made on the first Christians by looking at one of the oldest texts of the New Testament, the hymn Paul uses to introduce Jesus as Christ to the community at Philippi.

Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard being equal to God something to hold fast,
but emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and becoming like men,
and being found in the form of a man
he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on the cross.
Therefore God raised him above all
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee shall bend
in heaven, on the earth and under the earth
and every tongue confess
“Jesus Christ is the LORD”
to the glory of God, the Father. (Phil. 2:6–11)

The Philippians hymn is generally regarded as pre-Pauline.¹ It must have been composed in the forties, about a decade after Easter. This text contains perhaps the most far-reaching christological statements of the entire New Testament. Yet as with so much of the gospel, its implications become clear only when one sees

¹ See Joachim Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* [*The Letter to the Philippians*] (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), 131–133; Rudolph Schnackenburg, “Christologische Entwicklungen im Neuen Testament” [Christological Development in the New Testament], in *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik* [The Mystery of Salvation: Outline for a Salvation-Historical Dogmatics], 5 vols., eds. Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965): III/1:322; Wilhelm Egger, *Galaterbrief, Philipperbrief, Philemonbrief* [The Letters to the Galatians, the Philippians, and Philemon] (Würzburg: Echter, 1985), 60.

it against its Old Testament background. “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has spoken the truth, it is an irrevocable word: ‘To me every knee shall bend, every tongue shall confess.’ Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength” (Isa. 45:23–24).

With amazing promptness after the death of Jesus, the first Christians applied to him what the Old Testament says about God.² Jesus, the Galilean carpenter, has received from God “the name above every name,” the name which is nothing less than the divine name itself. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bend and all shall confess that “Jesus Christ is the *Lord*.” He is the *kyrios*—the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to designate the divine name.

Martin Hengel rightly concludes about this early expression of Christian belief in Jesus: “In this time span of not even two decades more happened christologically than in the entire seven centuries that followed, up to the completion of the early Church’s dogma.”³ I see only two possibilities for explaining this development. One possibility that has proven attractive to scholars is that the first generation itself completed this process of the “divinization” of Jesus in an incredibly short time. That conclusion, of course, depends on establishing what the origin of such ideas might be. Since the beginning of historical biblical criticism, external influences have been invoked to explain this development. Some scholars see patterns from the Greek myth of Hercules or the oriental myth of Anthropos, the primal man and redeemer derived from gnosticism. The schema of humiliation and exaltation on which the Philippians hymn is built can be found also in gnosticism.

Because it offers to account for the sudden appearance of the idea of Jesus’ preexistence, this possible explanation seems, at first glance, persuasive. There are several reasons, however, that speak against this hypothesis. The most important of these reasons has to do with the hypothesis’ neglect of the Old Testament. Read in light of the Old Testament, the Philippians hymn clearly stands within the biblical tradition, specifically that of the Wisdom literature and Isaiah. These influences are much more plausible than predications that the hymn reflects a unified gnostic redeemer myth encountered by early Christians.⁴

And reading of the hymn that respects the continuity between the Old and the New Testaments, a continuity declared by Jesus himself (see Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:44), opens up new possibilities for interpretation and understanding. Such a reading makes it possible to conceive that “the activity of Jesus, whose impact on

2 Oscar Cullmann, *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments*, 5th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), 242. Eng.: *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1963).

3 Martin Hengel, “Christologische Hohheitstitel im Urchristentum,” [Supreme Christological Titles in Early Christianity] in *Der Name Gottes* [The Name of God], eds. Heinrich von Stietencron and Peter Beyerhaus (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1975), 107.

4 See Schnackenburg, “Christologische Entwicklungen,” 321; Gnllka, *Der Philipperbrief*, 138–144.

the disciples and, beyond them, on many circles of the people was so tremendous that we can hardly imagine it any longer today.”⁵

In fact, such a reading points us back to the figure of Jesus, himself—a figure too imposing, too powerful, too attractive, to be covered up or explained solely by recourse to pagan mythologies.⁶ What the early Christian community thought and assumed about Jesus immediately after Easter must have had its origin and reason in Jesus himself. A text like the Philippians hymn is conceivable only if Jesus himself, in his deeds and words, provided the basis and conditions for it. Again, it is a momentous misunderstanding to assume some deep rift between the testimony of Jesus and the faith of the early Church. This misunderstanding is possible only if one is willing “to recognize the modern dogma of the entirely non-Messianic Jesus”⁷—that is, of a Jesus who did not understand himself as standing within the scriptural traditions of his Jewish people.

Attending to the Jewish context for New Testament, then, points us back to history, to the central event in Jerusalem in about the year 30—Jesus’ death on the cross and the radical reversal brought about by the disciples’ experiences of the appearances of the risen Jesus. These experiences, not the importation of some cross-cultural redeemer myth, are the answer to how experience about Jesus and knowledge about his historical figure could “transform themselves” so quickly into faith in the heavenly Son of God. In whatever way these experiences should be understood, they gave the disciples the certainty that Jesus’ death on the cross had meaning, and even more—that his death and his entire life before that were willed by God, that his word was proven true and his claim justified. That Jesus is God’s own most proper action.

The Shift in Perspective: The Case of Paul

Paul, too, had the experience of the early Church. He came to share in “the surpassing value of knowing” Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:8) and it changed his view of Jesus completely. Already before his conversion he knew who Jesus was: a dangerous, blasphemous rebel from Galilee whose disciples must be persecuted because they deviated from the traditions of the fathers (Phil. 3:5–6; Gal. 1:13–14). Yet after his conversion, Paul judged that this knowledge was knowledge “according to human standards” or, literally, “according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16). What happened to Paul on the road to Damascus is something he later understood as an event comparable in greatness to the first day of creation. Through the encounter with Jesus (“I have seen our Lord” 1 Cor. 9:1) he himself became a new man. “For the God who said,

5 Martin Hengel, “Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie” [Christology and New Testament Chronology] in *Neues Testament und Geschichte* [The New Testament and History], eds. Heinrich Baltensweiler and Bo Reick (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972), 64.

6 See Schönborn, *My Jesus: Encountering Christ in the Gospel* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 14.

7 Hengel, “Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie,” 48.

‘Let light shine out of darkness!’ (Gen. 1:3) has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Here again, we see an early understanding of Jesus, and of Christian discipleship, described in terms of the Old Testament. Paul draws a parallel between conversion to Christ and the account of the first covenant in creation. It is God’s creation of light that makes all seeing possible in the first place. By a similar such creative deed, God in Christ Jesus comes to shine in the darkness of the human heart. Conversion to Christ is a new creation. It is only when the “eyes of our heart” (Eph. 1:18) are illumined in this way, or more exactly, when they are created anew beyond their natural powers of knowledge, that the “glory of God” shines up in Jesus so that we recognize him as the Son of God (that is to say, his radiance with which he appears in the Old Testament). We note that here, too, Paul’s account relies on an important Old Testament phrase (*doxa tou theou*), associating Christ with the radiance with which God appears to the people of the old covenant.⁸

The conversion of Paul, his knowledge of Jesus as the Son of God, is a new creation of man (2 Cor. 5:17). This “shining up” did not block Paul’s vision of the “true historical Jesus.” Although it blinded his earthly eyes, it allowed him to see Jesus’ true identity. In a single act, *epignosis*, the deep, true knowledge of Jesus was given to him as a gift.

Paul is absolutely clear about attributing the initiative to God: “God in his grace . . . revealed his Son to me.” (Gal. 1:15–16; 2 Cor. 4:6). In this process the knowledge of God merges into the knowledge of Christ, just as Christ’s self-manifestation and God’s self-revelation merge into each other. For Pauline christology this merging is especially important, because it shows the complete unity of operation between God and Jesus, which proves itself in subsequent reflection to be a unity of substance.

So Paul can also say that Christ showed himself to him (1 Cor. 15:8; 9:1). Paul has been grasped by him (Phil. 3:12), known by him (Gal. 4:8–9; 1 Cor. 13:12b). What he writes in his letters is consistent with the narrative of his conversion in Acts. There, it is the luminous apparition of Christ with the address, “Why do you persecute me?” that triggers conversion (Acts 9:4). Pauline christology in its entirety exists only because of this divine gift and initiative—the revelation of Jesus, the “self-disclosure” of God.

But if all knowledge of Christ is a grace, one must ask: why do some have it and others not? Is theological talk in this case not superfluous? One thing is clear, to know Jesus as Christ is not a matter of “greater” knowledge. This, too, is a point of scandal—that no one has access to the knowledge of Christ but by the free and unmerited revelation of God. The true knowledge of Christ is “hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to infants” (Matt. 11:25). Living knowledge is

⁸ See Ezek. 9:3; 10:19. The phrase, *doxa tou theo* is also rendered in the Greek Old Testament as *doxa Kyriou*. See Exod. 40:34–35; Lev. 9:23; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 5:14.

possible only if it is given. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

This luminous self-evidence of the figure of Jesus in Paul is not an isolated, individualist process that takes place without social relations, a purely subjective private experience without communicability. The experience that Jesus is the Christ has an impact also on Paul's relation to those who likewise recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and beyond this to all human beings.

The communities of Judea "only heard it said, The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal. 1:23). For Paul, conversion meant not only the changing of old relations, but also the opening of new relations, of a new community. Faith in Jesus as the Christ and the community of those who believe in Jesus as the Christ are inseparable. Paul takes this very seriously. Even though he has been called personally by God and not by human beings, even though he has seen Jesus himself, he goes up to Jerusalem after fourteen years and there presents his gospel to the "acknowledged leaders . . . in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain" (Gal. 2:1-2).

The "knowledge of Jesus Christ" is for Paul not cut loose from the tradition, from the memory of the Church. One can see this continuity again and again in his letters, whether he expressly appeals to the tradition of the community (1 Cor. 15:1-11, it is precisely about the resurrection that Paul speaks here), or whether he takes up the liturgical traditions of the churches, as he does in quoting the ancient hymn in Philippians. What stands at the beginning of his christology is the experience he came to share in. This experience, however, in order not to run in vain, needs to be tied into the memory, the recollection of the Church.

And the experience of Jesus Christ can only be interpreted and proclaimed by continuous reference back to Scripture, that is to the Law, the prophets, and the psalms, to the whole of the Old Testament. This is part of the common basis of Paul's proclamation—that the figure of Jesus, his meaning and path, is "in accord with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). The point is that the knowledge of Jesus Christ merges with a profound rereading of the Scriptures of Israel, a reading that proceeds from Christ as the center and hinge of the Scriptures.

Immediately there is something, however, that must be added in order to avoid misunderstandings. Jesus bears these divine features as the crucified. Precisely this is the scandal on which Gentiles as well as Jews make themselves stumble. The Philippians hymn shows this clearly. Exaltation comes to the humiliated one. Paul knew very well the danger of forgetting the cross. He relentlessly recalled the message of Jesus as the crucified. Precisely this center of Christian faith is met by lack of understanding, rejection, and ridicule in the oldest pagan testimonies about Christ and those who believe in him.

Between the year 110 and 112, some who were accused of being Christians described their crime to the Roman procurator Pliny the Younger in the following way. "Our entire crime or error consisted in this, that regularly on a certain day be-

fore sunrise we came together, singing responsorial songs to *Christ as God* (*carmen Christo quasi deo*).⁹ A little later, Tacitus writes in his well-known narrative of the persecution under Nero: “The author of this name [that is, the name “Christians”], Christ, was executed under Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate.”¹⁰ There is a certain incredulousness in Tacitus’ tone. A simple uneducated carpenter from the despised Jewish people, condemned to a shameful death as a political offender, is supposed to be the revealer of God’s truth, the future judge of the world, even God himself? This disdain and skepticism is also seen in the early caricature of Christians, found on the Palatine Hill, which depicts the crucified Christ with an ass’ head and the text below, “Alexander adores his God.”¹¹

The challenge of venerating God himself in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, a challenge that can grow sharper all the way to an existential crisis, is already formulated with full clarity by the pagan philosopher Celsus between the second and third century.

How should we judge that precisely that one is God, who . . . showed none of the works he announced and, when we convicted him and wanted to punish him, hid himself and attempted to escape and was most shamefully captured, betrayed precisely by those whom he called his disciples? On the contrary, if he was God he could not have fled nor be led away bound, least of all be abandoned and handed over by his companions who personally shared with him and had him as a teacher and who considered him the savior and the son and messenger of the highest God.¹²

It is with good reason that Celsus places this accusation on the lips of a Jew. Jews and pagans were in agreement on this point, and this is why Paul stressed so decidedly, “But we proclaim Christ as the crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:1–2). A crucified Son of God, *kyrios*, Messiah, *soter* (savior)—this is a matchless scandal. There is for this reason no plausible “explanation” for the genesis of this scandalous teaching—again, except the supposition that Jesus himself is the origin and the reason for this teaching. “Inventing” the figure of a crucified Messiah, of a divine Son who dies on a cross—is something neither Jews nor Gentiles could even imagine, let alone do.

There is only one meaningful explanation, then. And that is that Jesus him-

9 *Letters*, Book 10, Letter 96, par. 7. Text in *Readings in Church History*, rev. ed., ed. Colman J. Barry (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1985), 75–76.

10 *Annals*, Book 15, par. 44. Text in *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, rev. ed., ed. C. K. Barrett (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 15–16.

11 Artwork in *Ante Pacem: Archeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, Gradon F. Snyder (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 2003), 60.

12 Origen, *Against Celsus*, Book 2, Chapter 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 433–434.

self is coherent, through his deeds and words, through his life and passion, through his death and resurrection. He himself is the reason for christology, he is the light that makes his own figure luminously evident. It is not true that christological dogma was “painted over” him and “covered” him. Rather, the light goes out from him himself. “In your light do we see light” (Ps. 36:10). This is the light that blinded Paul and threw him to the ground, that made him blind and at the same time “enlightened the eyes of his heart” (Eph. 1:18) so that he was able to know Christ.¹³

This is why christology will always and ever again be the attempt of seeing the figure of Christ in its own light, to plumb the depths of its “coherence.” This attempt, in order to be true to itself, must always be an attempt to understand Christ in light of his own self-understanding—that is, in light of the Old Testament. Like the apostles and Paul, our christological reflections must attempt to understand why it was necessary that “the Messiah had to suffer all this and so enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26).

The focus of christology is this “necessity,” which cannot be derived from any human logic and reason, but which is at the same time the deepest answer to all human questioning, failure and longing. Jesus is the response—surprising, unexpected, scandalous and yet a source of happiness beyond everything hoped for—God’s response to the restlessness of the human heart. “*Inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te,*”—restless is our heart, until it rests in you.¹⁴

To the question how the faithful Jew Paul could say, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend” (Phil. 2:10), how he could call for an adoring genuflection before Jesus, my revered teacher François Dreyfus (+1999), a Dominican of Jewish origin, gave the following answer.

One really has to experience the same thing as a Saint Paul on one’s spiritual journey, to appreciate the enormous difficulty presented by faith in the mystery of the incarnation to a Jew. In comparison with this, all other obstacles are laughable. This obstacle is so radical that one cannot overcome it. One must walk around it like a mountain peak whose north face is unconquerable and which can be scaled only from the south. For it is only afterwards, in the light of faith, that one discovers that Trinity and incarnation do not contradict Israel’s monotheist dogma, “Hear O Israel, the Lord, our God, is one” (Mark 12:29

13 See Hengel, “Die christologischen Hoheitstitel im Urchristentum,” 90–92. See also Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche* [Jesus Christ in the Belief of the Church], 5 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 1:14–16. Eng.: *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2 vols. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 1, para. 1. Text in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1866–90), 45.

citing Deut. 6:4). And one discovers not only that there is no contradiction, but that the Christian dogma is an unfolding and even a crowning of the faith of Israel. For the one who has had a similar experience, there is an insight that opens itself: the pious Jew of the first century is in the same situation as the one of our day. Only a firm security can make him walk around this obstacle. And only a secured instruction about Jesus can provide the condition for it."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Jésus savait-il qu'il était Dieu?*, 3d ed. (Paris : Cerf, 1984), note 16. Eng.: *Did Jesus Know He Was God?* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1989).