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# THE KENOSIS QUESTION

by THOMAS A. THOMAS

**T**HE Associate Professor of Theology in Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, takes a fresh look at the implications of the statement in Phil 2: 7 that our Lord "emptied himself" in becoming man.

**T**HE Kenosis question, as it concerns the Lord Jesus Christ, revolves around the interpretation of one passage of Scripture, Philippians 2: 5-8, and in particular the verb ἐκένωσεν in verse seven. Lewis Sperry Chafer has declared that this passage, "due to the fact that unbelief has misinterpreted and magnified it all out of proportion, is more fully treated exegetically by scholars of past generations than almost any other in the Word of God".<sup>1</sup> This may very well be so, but nevertheless, the present writer is convinced that more needs to be said.

## I. THE FORM OF GOD

The heart of the question seems to centre in verse six with the meaning of the expression ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, "in the form of God". To determine what is the μορφή, the form, would seem to be the key to determining what it is that Christ emptied Himself of. For He who was in the μορφή of God emptied (ἐκένωσεν) Himself, "and took upon him the form (μορφή) of a servant". It seems obvious, thus, that it was the μορφή θεοῦ that was laid aside at the incarnation. He exchanged the "form of God" for the "form of a servant".

It seems definite that μορφή involves more than simply the outward form or appearance. Moulton and Milligan say that μορφή "always signifies a form which truly and fully expresses the being which underlies it".<sup>2</sup> As Ewing puts it, "This word is sometimes used to denote the nature itself or substance of anything". " 'Being in the form of God' ", he continues, "signifies being really God, just as the phrase 'took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men', signifies that He was really a man in a mean and lowly condition".<sup>3</sup> Abbott-Smith says that in philosophical language it refers to "the specific character or essential

<sup>1</sup> *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek N.T.*

<sup>3</sup> Greville Ewing, *A Greek and English Lexicon*.

form".<sup>4</sup> Chrysostom, in his second *Homily* on this passage, says that "being in the form of God" involves the concept of "having nothing inferior to the Father, being equal to Him". Lightfoot comments on this word by saying, "Though μορφή is not the same as φύσις or οὐσία, yet the possession of the μορφή involves participation in the οὐσία also: for μορφή implies not the external accidents but the essential attributes".<sup>5</sup> Vincent has some very pertinent observations at this point. He says, "The word is used in its philosophic sense, to denote that expression of being which carries in itself the distinctive nature and character of the being to whom it pertains, and is thus permanently identified with that nature and character". "Μορφή form is identified with the essence of a person or thing." "This mode of expression, this *setting* of the divine essence, is not *identical* with the essence itself, but is *identified with it*, as its natural and appropriate expression, answering to it in every particular . . . It is the perfect expression of a perfect essence." "To say, then, that Christ was *in the form of God*, is to say that He existed as essentially one with God. The expression of deity through human nature (ver. 7) thus has its background in the expression of deity as deity in the eternal ages of God's being. Whatever the mode of this expression, it marked the being of Christ in the eternity before creation. As the *form* of God was identified with the *being* of God, so Christ, being in the form of God, was identified with the being, nature, and personality of God."<sup>6</sup> Müller observes in a footnote that "μορφή denotes the inner being as it actually and concretely realizes itself in the individual".<sup>7</sup> He also cites Vincent's commentary at this point to the effect that "μορφή here means that expression of being which is identified with the essential nature and character of God and which reveals it."<sup>8</sup>

Enough has been said that we can reach some conclusion as to the meaning of μορφή. The word appears to refer to the outward, visible manifestation or expression of an inner essence or reality. Christ in His pre-incarnate state, as the λόγος ἄσαρκος, appeared to the inhabitants of heaven as God, because in reality He is God.

<sup>4</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the N.T.*

<sup>5</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1953), p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), Vol. III, pp. 430, 431.

<sup>7</sup> Jac. J. Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and Philemon*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

His outward, visible appearance expressed His essential nature and character, and His essential nature and character is that of God. If he were not truly and fully God He could not have been in the μορφή of God, for the μορφή involves participation in the οὐσία and outwardly manifests that οὐσία.

Μορφή is often contrasted with σχῆμα, *shape, figure, fashion*. Σχῆμα, as used in the New Testament, is distinguished from μορφή in that it refers to an outward manifestation or appearance which does not express its inner reality (II Cor. 11: 13-15). Abbott-Smith describes the difference "as the outward and accidental" as contrasted with "the inward and essential".<sup>9</sup> There is also a character of changeableness and instability in σχῆμα. The outward appearance of the person or thing is transitory (I Cor. 7: 31; Phil. 2: 8).<sup>10</sup> Christ, then, is said to have been in the μορφή of God before His incarnation, and not the σχῆμα because His outward appearance manifested His inner, essential, eternal character. He outwardly appeared as God because in reality He is God. This is what is involved in the expression μορφή Θεοῦ.

That "being in the form of God" involves equality with deity is further confirmed by the remainder of the verse. The apostle says, Οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα Θεῷ, which is translated in the KJV as "thought it not robbery to be equal with God". The meaning of this expression has met with no little difference of opinion among commentators. Much of the discussion centres around the meaning of ἀρπαγμός. Some have interpreted it as a *prize which is to be grasped, to be held on to, which must not be allowed to slip away*.<sup>11</sup> The intention of the passage, on this view, is that He did not consider equality with God a thing to be maintained at all costs, "a prize which must not slip from His grasp",<sup>12</sup> but emptied Himself and was incarnated and took upon Him the form of a servant.

However, this interpretation may present a very serious problem, although not necessarily so, depending on how μορφή Θεοῦ is understood. It is difficult to see how the μορφή can refer to the divine essence itself, or the divine attributes, as Lightfoot says, and still retain the deity of Christ after His incarnation, for it is

<sup>9</sup> Abbott-Smith, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> See Müller, *op. cit.*: cf. also Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-132, although we would differ with his conclusion that μορφή Θεοῦ refers to the divine attributes and suggests the same idea as expressed in John by ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ and in the Nicene Creed as Θεὸς ἐκ Θεοῦ.

<sup>11</sup> So Lightfoot, Vine, Müller, Johnstone, Robertson, Vincent.

<sup>12</sup> Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

the μορφή of which He emptied Himself.<sup>13</sup> It is only if the μορφή refers to the outward, visible manifestation or expression of the deity, rather than to the deity itself, that such a view can be in accord with the testimony of the rest of Scripture as to Christ's full and complete deity here on earth (cf. Col. 2: 9; I Tim. 3: 16).

The second view is that which considers ἀπραγμός to mean *robbery* or *usurpation*.<sup>14</sup> So the expression comes to mean that equality with God was our Lord's natural possession and inherent right. It was not a thing to be grasped after, or seized, or that one in an act of robbery would do for that which he desires. He already had equality with God. This had previously been stated by saying He was in the "form of God". And so He had no need to grasp after, or attempt to seize or usurp that which He already had. There have been a number of variations in the manner in which this view has been expressed, but as set forth here it would seem to be the preferable view. One of the principal objections that has been raised to this interpretation is that it does not fit the context.<sup>15</sup> But on the contrary, it would seem very much to fit the context. The apostle has just said that Christ was "in the form of God", and thus He is God. And so, further to emphasize the fact of our Lord's deity, he goes on to say that equality with God was not something which Christ had any need to seize or usurp. Being "in the form of God", He already had equality with God.

The question now needs to be asked, What is "the form of God", μορφή Θεοῦ, which the pre-incarnate Christ possessed? We have already said that it was the outward, visible manifestation or expression of the essence or character of God. Lightfoot says the μορφή is the divine attributes.<sup>16</sup> Vine says it is the divine nature.<sup>17</sup> Now it is true that the one who is in the μορφή of God *has* the divine nature or attributes but it hardly seems that we can say that the μορφή *is* the divine nature or attributes. Perhaps

<sup>13</sup> We shall discuss this more fully later. There are, obviously, those who would disagree with this statement.

<sup>14</sup> So, Rainy, Moule, and likely Calvin, although he is not clear at this point. Also the translators of the KJV.

<sup>15</sup> So, Lightfoot, Vine, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 132. Müller quotes this passage with approval, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians* (London: Oliphants Ltd., 1955), p. 56. The writer is also aware that there are those who make the expression ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ ὑπάρχων refer to the incarnate Christ rather than His pre-incarnate state. But this is a very unsatisfactory view and would hardly seem to fit the text.

this is what Lightfoot and Vine mean. For if this is so then Christ has clearly divested Himself of His deity in the kenosis. This we must reject. The only thing the μορφή can possibly mean is the effulgence of His glory. This is that by which He was outwardly manifest to the inhabitants of heaven as God. He outwardly displayed the glory of God because in His essence, His nature, and character, and person, He is God. He could not be mistaken for an angel, or any other being. The effulgence of the glory of deity declared what He was, God. For the μορφή is the visible expression of the inner essence.

## II. THE SELF-EMPTYING OF CHRIST

In verse 7 the apostle writes ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφήν δούλου λαβών. The KJV translates it, "But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant". The word that we are primarily concerned with is ἐκένωσεν, much better translated *He emptied*, and the question, Of what did He empty Himself? The answers which have been given to this question are many and varied. We can mention but a few. Among the most radical views, of whom Gess seems to be the classical example, being quoted by both Bruce<sup>18</sup> and Hodge<sup>19</sup>, is that "the Eternal Son at the incarnation laid aside the Godhead and became a man".<sup>20</sup> Gore, not so radical, would have it that Christ "abandoned certain prerogatives of the divine mode of existence in order to assume the human".<sup>21</sup> He could not abandon His personality, or His essential relation to the Father, but He did abandon such things as the exercise of His omniscience. A. M. Fairbairn<sup>22</sup> expresses a similar idea when he says that the ethical, internal attributes of truth and love could never be surrendered, but that the external, physical attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence were limited, restrained, or veiled.

Another view states that the divine attributes were in no way surrendered, but that Christ divested Himself of "the independent exercise of the divine attributes".<sup>23</sup> Strong considers this a much

<sup>18</sup> A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905), pp. 144-152.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 235-237.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 171.

<sup>22</sup> A. M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), pp. 476, 477. Similar views were held by Thomasius, Delitzsch, and Crosby.

<sup>23</sup> So A. H. Strong, Emery Bancroft.

milder view than the two which we have previously mentioned but nevertheless he describes his view in the following terms which would seem to put it in a more radical position than that of Gore or Fairbairn: "Omniscience gives up all knowledge but that of the child, the infant, the embryo, the infinitesimal germ of humanity. Omnipotence gives up all power but that of the impregnated ovum in the womb of the Virgin. The Godhead narrows itself down to a point that is next to absolute extinction."<sup>24</sup> If this is what Strong means when he says that Christ resigned "the independent exercise of the divine attributes", then he would certainly seem to verge on saying that Christ divested Himself of at least His relative attributes, and if "the Godhead narrows itself down to a point that is next to absolute extinction" he does not seem to be very far from the view of Gess that at the incarnation Christ laid aside His deity and became a man. However, Strong would surely deny this conclusion for he says that Christ "resigned not the possession, nor yet entirely the use" of the attributes, but simply the "independent exercise" of them. What he means, surely, by the surrender of the "independent exercise of the divine attributes" is, as he goes on to say, "the submission of the Logos to the control of the Holy Spirit and the limitations of his Messianic mission" and "in the continuous surrender, on the part of the God-man, so far as his human nature was concerned, of the exercise of those divine powers with which it was endowed by virtue of its union with the divine, and in the voluntary acceptance, which followed upon this, of temptation, suffering, and death".<sup>25</sup>

By way of criticism of these kenotic views which we have mentioned, there must be kept in mind the nature of the divine essence. God is simple; He is not composed of parts which may be added, subtracted, or changed, as is true of men. The attributes are what God *is*; they are not what God *has*. He is not simply the divine Being who, in addition, also happens to be holy, righteous, just, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so forth. The attributes are of the very essence of His being. God *is* love, not simply, He loves. God *is* righteous, not simply, He always acts righteously. God does what He does because He is what He is. His actions are always in accord with, and the expression of, His nature. And so, if in any way God divested Himself of a single

<sup>24</sup> A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1945), 3 vols. in 1, p. 703. E. Bancroft, however, does *not* follow Strong in this statement.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

one of His attributes He would no longer be what He is; He would cease to be God.<sup>26</sup>

Of course the view of Thomasius and those who follow him is to mark a distinction between the relative and essential attributes of God.<sup>27</sup> The relative attributes, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, are said to be descriptive of God's relationship to His creation, rather than essential characteristics of His essence. Omnipotence describes the power of God over His universe, and His control of all that comes to pass in it, Omnipresence describes the relationship of God to His universe under the category of space. God's presence is everywhere and He transcends all spatial limitations. Omniscience concerns the relationship of God to the universe as the object of His knowledge. He knows, and understands, and sustains all things. It is said that the relations which are signified by these attributes depend for their reality on the existence of the created universe. In other words, in order for God to be omnipotent, the created universe must exist over which He exercises this power. So likewise, in order for Him to be omnipresent the universe must exist in which He can be omnipresent, and in order for Him to be omniscient there must be the created universe which He knows comprehensively. Thus the view is, that since these three attributes, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, are only relative to God's relationship to the creation, and not absolute and essential to His nature, Christ could and did divest Himself of these three attributes and still retain His essential deity. He could not surrender the absolute, essential attributes, but He did the relative ones.

But is this distinction between the relative and essential attributes justified? How can the simplicity of God be maintained and have attributes in the economic Trinity which are not essential to the ontological Trinity? Certainly these so-called relative attributes are not relative at all, but are essential ontologically to what God is in Himself quite apart from any relation to the creation. For example, certainly God does not require to have a creation which is to be known before He can have all knowledge. His knowledge is immediate and eternal. He has complete, comprehensive knowledge of this world and all that takes place in it because He has complete, comprehensive knowledge of Himself and His plan and purpose for this world which He is working

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV, 5, 8.

<sup>27</sup> A good summary of the views of Thomasius is presented by A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ*, pp. 138-144, based on Thomasius' work, *Christ's Person and Work* (Erlangen, 1856).

out. God does not attain His omniscience after He has created the universe. Rather, if His omniscience is not an essential attribute of His Being there could be no universe for Him to know. All three of these attributes are grounded in the very essence of God.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, one of the divine attributes is immutability. He is "the same, yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13: 8). "For I am the LORD, I change not . . ." (Mal. 3: 6). How the immutable God can divest Himself of any of His attributes, or can in any way so limit Himself that the full exercise of the attributes is not retained, and still maintain His immutability, is beyond the ability of this writer to understand.

As to saying that Christ resigned the "independent exercise of the divine attributes", we would reject the notion that there ever was any such a thing as the independent exercise of the attributes. To say that the members of the Godhead exercised the attributes independently of each other, but that at His incarnation Christ surrendered this independent exercise of the attributes, is to border on tri-theism. It tends toward conceiving of the Trinity as three Gods operating independently of each other. But the Godhead is an eternal tri-unity. The members of the Trinity never operate independently of each other, but in perfect, complete harmony. There is an interdependence of operation, rather than an independence. We recognize, of course, that in His condescension to take upon Himself humanity our Lord did submit himself to the will of His Heavenly Father (John 5: 30; Matt. 26: 39; Heb. 10: 7), and He did minister through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 2; 10: 38; Heb. 9: 14), but this is not the same as saying that He resigned some supposed independent exercise of the divine attributes. In fact, the *kenosis* text in Philippians 2: 6, 7 says nothing about the attributes at all.

Of what, then, did Christ empty Himself? We must find the answer in the text itself. It says that He was in the μορφή of God, but He emptied (ἐκένωσεν) Himself, and took upon Him the μορφή of a servant. The term μορφή, as we have seen, refers to the outward, visible manifestation or expression of an inner essence. And the outward, visible manifestation of deity, for Christ before His incarnation was in the "form of God", is the effulgence of His glory. And so the pre-incarnate Christ, being God, appeared to the inhabitants of heaven in the μορφή, in the effulgence of

<sup>28</sup> For a helpful argument against the Thomasian Christology see Francis J. Hall, *The Kenotic Theory* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), pp. 129-137.

the glory of deity. But, verse 7 says, He emptied Himself, and took upon Him the μορφή of a servant. He emptied Himself of what? Of what could it be but the μορφή Θεοῦ, the effulgence of His glory? That is the only thing the context will allow. His glory was hidden, it was veiled. As the incarnate Christ He did not appear to the world as God. His full deity was there. None of it was laid aside. That which He emptied Himself of was the outward manifestation or expression of that deity. As the people of Palestine looked at Him they saw a man. And they considered Him to be a man. No one would have recognized His deity from His outward appearance. He had the μορφή of a servant—the lowliness, the humility of the servant of Jehovah, obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Calvin says, "He laid aside His glory in the view of men, not by lessening it, but by concealing it". "The abasement of the flesh was, notwithstanding, like a veil, by which His divine majesty was concealed."<sup>29</sup> Johnstone describes that of which Christ emptied Himself as "the glory in which He had been revealed to angels in heaven—the glory in which, at times, in His pre-incarnate state, He, under all the economies the Revealer of God, had shown Himself to man, as at Sinai, or to Isaiah, when he 'saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple'—of this glory He 'emptied Himself'".<sup>30</sup> Lightfoot puts it, "He divested Himself . . . of the glories, the prerogatives of deity". He "emptied, stripped Himself of the insignia of majesty".<sup>31</sup> However, Müller raises the objection that the verse does not say Christ emptied Himself of the "form of God". In fact, it does not say what He emptied Himself of. It simply states that He was in the "form of God" and He "emptied Himself", without giving any definite antecedent of the *kenosis*. To say that He divested Himself of His glory, says Müller, "is no legitimate deduction from the phrase in question, but a bold conclusion based on the subsequent statement that He took the form of a servant".<sup>32</sup>

But this objection of Müller does not seem valid. It is true that the apostle does not say in the text that Christ "emptied Himself of it", in referring to the μορφή, but is that at all necessary? The

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Philippians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Johnstone, *Lectures on the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 148.

<sup>31</sup> Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

context supplies the antecedent without its being necessarily stated, and the only thing the context permits is that He emptied Himself of the "form of God". The taking upon Him of the "form of a servant" is simply a further substantiation of the fact that it was the "form of God" of which He emptied Himself. For even apart from this statement it certainly is a legitimate deduction to say that that of which Christ emptied Himself is His pre-incarnate glory, the μορφή Θεοῦ. Otherwise there is no antecedent of ἐκένωσεν.

### III. CONCLUSION

We have now reached the point where we may summarize our conclusions. What it is that Christ emptied Himself of at His incarnation can be determined only as we first discover the meaning of the term μορφή. For Philippians 2: 6, 7 says that He was in the μορφή of God but He emptied Himself and took upon Him the μορφή of a servant. The μορφή of God is not His deity, nor His divine nature or attributes. Rather, the term refers to the outward, visible manifestation or expression of the inner essence or character of that to which it refers. So, the μορφή, the outward visible expression of God, as He appeared to the inhabitants of heaven, is the effulgence of His glory. And so when the apostle says that Christ exchanged the "form of God" for the "form of a servant" he is saying that in His condescension to take upon Himself humanity that effulgence of the divine glory which was the visible expression of his deity was veiled or hidden. He emptied Himself of His glory, and instead took upon Him the "form of a servant". But in no sense were His deity or any attributes surrendered. "For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2: 9).

That there are other consequences of the incarnation cannot be denied. And these may very well include the manner in which He exercised His attributes. But these are not the *kenosis*. The apostle in the text in Philippians 2 says nothing about attributes. Furthermore, whatever effects His incarnation may have had upon our Lord, they can in no way be construed as diminishing from His absolute deity. He was God incarnate, God manifest in the flesh, in full possession of all the attributes of deity. Anything less than this is completely out of accord with the picture that we have of Him in the inspired, inscripturated Word.

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