

# Platonism, Ruler Cult and Christology: Divine ‘being’ that ‘becomes’ in the Philippians Christ hymn?’ Cambridge New Testament Seminar, 13<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2018.

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## 1. Recap on last year’s paper

In last year’s paper I made two arguments. The second—that ἀρπαγμός means ‘abduction marriage’ and that Christ rejects the violent sexual conduct of the pagan gods and of Caligula—plays a minor role today. The first argument I made *is* relevant and, thankfully, is easier to explain.

[2017 Argument 2:] Phil 2:6–8 is replete with the language of stories of the gods’ self-transformations.

6a ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων

b οὐχ ἀρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο

c τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ,

7a ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν

b μορφὴν δούλου λαβών,

c ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος:

d καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

8a ἐταπεινώσεν ἑαυτὸν

b γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου,

c θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.

6a who, being in the form of God,

b + c considered τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ not rape or marriage by abduction,

7a but emptied himself

b taking the form of a slave

c becoming in human likeness

d and being found in form as a human

8a he humbled himself

b becoming obedient unto death

c even death on a cross.

In the underlined text on the handout, Philippians evokes stories, as old as Homer and as common as temples and statues, of gods and goddesses taking the form of human beings to disguise their earthly visitations; stories that typically end in a moment of revelation, human recognition and worship. Some of the linguistic connections have long been observed, especially by German commentators. But, I argued, they are far more extensive than just the language of a change of ‘form’ (*morphe*). The word γενόμενος in v. 7 (and v. 8) is especially significant since this is the regular verb used to describe the gods’ self-transformations.

The language in the first half of the Christ hymn is pagan, not Jewish or biblical. The first verses are not about Adam or the suffering servant. They tell the Christ story in language intelligible to Paul’s gentile readers. However, the *content* is particular and unprecedented. No Greek or Roman god so totally self-transformed that he ‘emptied himself’ or humbled himself to the point of an obedient death on a cross. And Christ is one ‘in the form of *the one* God’ of Israel’s scriptures, as becomes clear in the verses that follow. The linguistic *form* is pagan; the theological *content* a distinctive case of messianic monotheism; form and content united by incarnation—a story about God becoming man and the partial clothing of that story in pagan myth.

This of course is the decisive nail in the coffin of the view advocated by James Dunn that there is no Christology of pre-existence here. For the pagan reader it puts Christ firmly on the divine side of the distinction between gods (who can self-transform) and mortals (who cannot). It means also that the ὑπάρχων is causal: ‘*because* he was in the form of God he was able to take the form of a slave’.

I agree with the majority that in many other respects the hymn portrays Christ as a divine ruler, as Caesar's rival. That view has sometimes led to the conclusion that the hymn is more political, than theological. One implication of my argument *today* is that, on the contrary – as I pointed out last year's discussion of the *harpagmos* clause—the hymn subordinates politics to theology, ruler cult to metaphysics.

## 2. The consensus view of Phil 2:6c

My focus today is Phil 2:6c: τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ, about which commentators typically make two judgements.

1. Almost everyone translates these four words as 'equality with God' or 'to be equal with God'.
2. And there is a near consensus that τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ denotes a 'status'; a position of honour that Christ either has in pre-existence or that he will attain after death and exaltation. That means most now follow the view of Ernst Lohmeyer that the phrase does not intend an innate nature or essence; it is not about metaphysics.<sup>1</sup>
  - a. This text supports the now widely held view that the earliest divine Christology was functional, not ontological, and that it is anachronistic to read back into Pauline texts later, patristic, notions of a Christ's divine nature.
  - b. As far as I can tell, no recent commentators disagree (though some *do* think that 'being in the form of God'—v. 6a—implies a nature).

These two judgements (about translation and meaning) are related to a third, about which there is less agreement, namely that ἴσα θεῶ is language which the Philippians would take to describe a divine ruler.

Quite a few think that here divine equality evokes the centuries-old technical terminology for the status of divine rulers who were placed at the pinnacle of the pyramid of honours in Greek cities.<sup>2</sup> In the various forms of ruler cult that developed in the centuries after Alexander the Great, kings, and then the Roman emperor, received *isotheoi timai*, literally 'god-equal honours' or 'honours equal to those given to the gods'.<sup>3</sup> That and similar expressions were used in literary texts, in papyri

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<sup>1</sup> Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus*, 27 'niemals um Gleichheit der Substanz, sondern der Funktion, niemals des Wesens, sondern der Macht'; Feuillet, A., 'L'Homme-Deiü considéré dans sa condition terrestre de serviteur et de rédempteur (Phil. II, 5ss et texts parallèles)', *Vivre et Penser* 2 (1942), p. 62: v. 6c express only 'l'égalité d'honneur et de traitement'; P. Grelot, 'Deux expressions difficiles de Philippiens 2,6–7', *Bib* 53 (1972), p. 500: v. 6 does not relate to 'une speculation sur la nature divine du Christ' and p. 501 'on fera donc bien de la paraphraser légèrement en la traduisant: "le statut (ou la condition) d'égalité avec Dieu"', J. Gnllka, *Der Philipperbrief: Auslegung*, (HTKNT 10; Herder: Freiburg, 1968), p. 117 and C. Spicq, *Notes de lexicographie néo-testamentaire* (OBO, 22; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1978), vol. 3, p. 357 (= C. Spicq and J. D. Ernest, *Theological lexicon of the New Testament*, [Hendrickson: Peabody, ass., 1994], vol. 3, p 229).

<sup>2</sup> For this point see S. Lösch, *Deitas Jesu und antike Apotheose; ein Beitrag zur Exegese und Religionsgeschichte*, (Rottenburg: Bader, 1933), p. 125; P. Grelot, 'Deux expressions', p. 501; Spicq, *Notes de lexicographie*, vol. 3, pp. 357–8 (= Spicq, *Theological Lexicon*, vol. 3, pp. 229–30) and especially E. M. Heen, 'Phil 2:6-11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule: *Isa theō* and the Cult of the Emperor in the East', in Horsley, R.A. (ed), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, PA, 2004), pp. 125–53, cf. *LSJ* 837–8.

<sup>3</sup> Noteworthy discussions of the phenomenon are D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, (Études Préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain

and monumental honorific decrees to say that communities treated a ruler as if he were a god. Such language was common, formulaic, and was well known in the Jewish world (2 Macc 9:12; Artapanus Frag. 3, §6; Philo *Embassy* 149; *Decal.* 7; *Moses* 2.19; *Laws* 1:13; *Virt.* 219; John 5:18; *Sib. Or.* 5:34, 138).<sup>4</sup>

The ruler cult connotations of τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ also, it is alleged, support the status view since, as Joseph Hellerman puts it, with divine equality expressions in ruler cult ‘substance or essential nature are generally not in view’ (Hellerman, *Philippians*).

The main burden of my argument today is that, whilst there is some truth to the ruler cult interpretation, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ *does not denote a status and the standard English translations miss the pointed force of the Greek.*

Rather, [Thesis statement]

*τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ is a rich poetic expression that should be translated ‘being in a manner equal with God’ or ‘a (divine) being in a manner equal with God’s manner of being’. It probably has Homeric connotations. It certainly serves a Philosophically provocative statement that in Christ there is a divine ‘being’ (v. 6) that ‘becomes’ (vv. 7–8)—a direct challenge to a basic Platonic dualism. It also connotes Christ’s identity as divine ruler. The phrase is one part of a strategy by which our hymn’s author interprets this Jewish Messiah for the pagan world, negotiating for Christology a unique position in relation to competing cultural, political, and philosophical mores.*

### 3. Reasons to doubt the consensus

Let me begin with some observations that give grounds to doubt the consensus.

First, it is true that a comparison between *Phil 2:9–11 (the second half of the hymn)* and the language and conventions of ruler cults warrants the conclusion that *in those verses* Christ receives a God-equal status: *in that part of the hymn* he receives a divine name, universal acclamation and prostration, actions which are covered by the technical expression ‘*istheoi timai*’—honours equal to gods. However, today most think that τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ defines Christ’s identity in pre-existence. It is *not* something that he waits for and does not grasp after. Rather it is similar to ‘being in the form of God’ And the fact that Christ self-transforms puts him squarely in the god-not-mortal category in a way that means it is fitting to speak of his being somehow equal with God already in the hiddenness of heavenly pre-existence.

Secondly, there are no other contextual indications that v. 6c defines a status. There is no human community to accord Christ an honorific status in pre-existence. Verse 6 does not use the language of honours (τιμαί/τιμάω), that rightly warrants us saying that ancient god-equal texts typically speak of a status, not a nature.

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108, Brill: Leiden, 1987–), vol. I.1, pp. 21–33; S. F. R. Price, ‘Gods and Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult’, *JHS* 104 (1984) pp. 79–95, esp. p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> So, we should not conclude, as does Heen, ‘Phil 2:6–11’, p. 148, that the presence of such language in our passage means it must have been composed by a gentile not a Jewish Christian.

Thirdly—and most important of all—according to the basic rules of Greek grammar, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ does not mean ‘equality with God’. As was regularly pointed out in the nineteenth and occasionally in twentieth centuries [see handout], this cannot be what τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ means since ἴσα is the adverbial (neuter plural) form of the adjective ἴσος and so must mean ‘equally, in equal manner’.<sup>5</sup> More on that in a moment.

Grammars and handbooks have reassured commentators that in this text there are legitimate reasons to treat ἴσα θεῷ as an adjectival expression: ‘being equal with God’.<sup>7</sup> The most common reason given is that ἴσα θεῷ in Phil 2:6 is an instance of an adverb being used adjectivally.<sup>8</sup> It is true that there are cases where adverbs of time and place are used as a predicate adjective, typically with the verb ‘to be’ (or with an ellipsis of that verb).<sup>9</sup> Examples are then adduced for ἴσα as an adjective not an adverb.

However, there is no precedent for an adjectival ἴσα θεῷ and none of the alleged parallels clearly demonstrate the case. The words ἴσα + noun (in dative) appear regularly in Hellenistic Greek and the LXX with the expected adverbial sense [see example from Job 30 LXX on handout]. If ἴσα θεῷ were adjectival we would expect it to be in the attributive position: τὸ ἴσα θεῷ εἶναι. As it is, there are other, linguistically normal, ways that our author could have spoken of ‘equality with God’ had he wanted to. John 5:18 provides the obvious adjectival syntax with ἴσος τῷ θεῷ [Jesus ‘makes himself equal with God (ἴσων ... τῷ θεῷ)’].<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is the principal reason that Gewiess (‘Die Philipperbriefstelle 2, 6b’, pp. 81–83) and Habermann, (*Präexistenzaussagen*, pp. 125–26) rejected the status view of ‘equality with God’. Recent contributions that reckon with the problem are R. L. Brawley, ‘From Reflex to Reflection? Identity in Philippians 2.6–11 and Its Context’, in K. Ehrensperger and J. B. Tucker (eds), *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation: Essays In Honour Of William S. Campbell* (Bloomsbury: London), pp. 139–140; G. M. Ellis, *Grammar as Theology: A Linguistic Rereading of Philippians 2:6-7a* (PhD, Otago, NZ, 2013), pp. 194–5, 278–83. For older scholarship that saw the problem and that anticipated the line I take here see H. A. W. Meyer and A. H. Franke, *Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über die Briefe Pauli an die Philipper, Kolosser und Philemon* (5<sup>th</sup> ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1886), p. 103; M. R. Vincent, *A Critical and exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1897), pp. 58–59.

<sup>7</sup> Following especially J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians: a revised text with introduction, notes, and dissertations* (Eighth edn., Macmillan: London, [1868] 1888), p. 111: ‘to be on an equality with God’.

<sup>8</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A grammar of the Greek New Testament in the light of historical research* (2nd edn., Hodder & Stoughton: New York, 1915), pp. 545–6; J. H. Moulton and N. Turner, *A grammar of New Testament Greek. Vol. 3, Syntax* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1963), p. 226; F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek grammar of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1961), (=BDF) §434 p. 224; G. Stählin *TDNT* vol. 3, p. 353 n. 52, cf. Lightfoot, *Philippians* 111.

<sup>9</sup> In Phil 4:5b the adverb ἐγγύς functions as a predicative adjective: ὁ κύριος ἐγγύς ‘the Lord (is) near.’ Cf. Mark 11:19 ὄψέ; John 18:28 πρῶί; Eph 2:13 μακρὰν and ἐγγύς. The adverb οὕτως also sometimes functions this way (see Matt 1:18; 19:10; Mark 2:12; Rom 4:18; 9:20; 1 Cor 7:26; 1 Pet 2:15; LXX Gen 1:6, 9, 11).

<sup>10</sup> Alternatively the author could have used the compound ἰσόθειον. Compare the way Epiphanius *Against the Heresies* 2.2.45 (MPG 43.97) and Isidore of Pelusium *Epistles* 4.22 (MPG 78.1072) rephrase Paul’s text, thinking that it must be speaking of ‘equality with God’. Epiphanius summarizes Phil 2:6b–c: οὐκ ἠθέλησε γενέσθαι ἴσος Θεῷ δι’ ἀρπαγμοῦ ‘and he did not wish to be equal with God through (by means of) a grasping’, and Isidore comments that εἰ ἔρμαιον ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσων, οὐκ ἂν ἑαυτὸν ἐταπεινώσεν ‘if he considered being equal a windfall, he would not have humbled himself’. The way these two Christian authors comment on Phil 2:6 shows that τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ did not naturally mean ‘equality with God’.

Fourthly, to date, the comparison of τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ with contemporary texts describing divine rulers has tended to lump together a variety of Greek expressions, making doubtful semantic generalisations. Eric Heen has undertaken the most extensive study of comparative ancient God-equal texts.<sup>11</sup> He recognises that there were a variety of ways of speaking about divine equality, sometimes with an adjective or adjectival expression (ἰσόθεος, ἴσος θεῶ), and sometimes with the adverbial ἴσα θεῶ/θεοῖς. However, he judges that ‘the syntactic boundaries between the expressions [was] ... blurred in actual usage.’<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, Heen did not explain or justify this judgement and it is not obvious what basis there can be for it. Furthermore, he worked with a limited number of sources, referring to just twenty-four texts that speak of divine equality and only one text with an adverbial ἴσα θεῶ comparable to the ἴσα θεῶ of Phil 2:6c.

## 4. Divine Equality in the Greek Language Environment

A thorough search of the databases and secondary literature produces an inventory of over 140 texts, from Homer down to the early third century C.E., that speak of equality with God or the gods. A careful sorting and evaluation of that inventory confirms the grammatical observations of our nineteenth century forebears, but also puts the interpretation of these four words on a whole new footing.

Here then are the salient points from an evaluation of that inventory:

### A. There were a variety of phrases, compounds or verbal forms to express divine equality:

Principally, two that are adjectival:

- i. ἴσος (τῶ) θεῶ/θέοισιν ‘equal with God/gods’ (x3 texts)
- ii. ἰσόθεος ‘god-equal, equal to God/a god’ (x 64 texts)

One that is adverbial:

- iii. ἴσα (τῶ) θεῶ/ θεοῖς/ θεοῖσι(v) ‘equally with God/the gods, in a manner equal to God/the gods’ (x17 texts)

There were a variety of verbs and verbal phrases for the act of creating divine equality:

- iv. ἰσῶ + divine name or title in dative ‘make or deem equal with a god’; ἰσοθεῶ ‘make equal to God/the gods’, ἐξίσῶ + divine name ‘make equal with a god’, and ἰσάζω + θεῶ ‘make equal with God/a god’ (x8 texts)

### B. These words and phrases are employed in six discrete types of syntactical construction, for which I give you examples on the handout.

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<sup>11</sup> Heen, ‘Phil 2:6-11’.

<sup>14</sup> Heen, ‘Phil 2:6-11’, p. 147. For a lack of a distinction between the adjectival and the adverbial divine equality expressions appeal has often been made to J. B. Lightfoot’s judgement that, ‘Between the two expressions ἴσος εἶναι and ἴσα εἶναι no other distinction can be drawn, except that the former refers rather to the person, the latter to the attributes’ (Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 112). It is not clear to me that this means. It is not a judgement anchored in examples from, or a systematic survey of, the variety of ways in which Greek speakers articulated the notion of an equality with God or the gods.

## Type 1: Attributive statements

In 80 texts (55% of the total) the compound *ισόθεος* or the words *ἴσος θεῶ* serve as an attributive adjective, typically modifying the noun *τιμή*, in the technical expression *ισόθεοι τιμαί*.

Degree of the Island League regarding Ptolemy I Soter (c. 280 B.C.E.), recording, *inter alia*,  
 ‘all the Islanders, who were the [first] to have honoured (τετιμηκόσιμ) Ptolemy Soter with *god-equal honours* (ισοθέοις τιμαῖς) [both because] of his [public benefactions (εὐεργεσίας)] and because of his [services] to individuals’ *IG 12.7.506* lines 27–30.

Letter to Egyptian community, c. 18/19 C.E., papyrus:

‘Germanicus Caesar, son of Augustus (i.e. Tiberius) and grandson of the deified Augustus, proconsul, declares: on the one hand, your goodwill which always you display whenever you see me, I receive, but *your god-equal acclamations* (ισοθέους ἐκφωνήσεις ὑμῶν) which are invidious to me I wholly deprecate (ἐξ [ἄ]παντος παραιτοῦμαι). For they are fitting only to the one who is the saviour (μόνω τῷ σωτήρι ὄντως) and benefactor of the whole human race (εὐεργέτη τοῦ σύνπαντος τῶν ἀνθρώπων), my father’.

ἐγὼ σ’ ἴσον θεοῖσιν ἡγοῦμαι φίλον ‘I count you an equal-to-the-gods friend’  
 Euripides *IA* 67.

*ισόθεος* φώς ‘a god-like man’ 12x in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey et al* ...

## Type 2: Predicative

23 texts (17% of texts)

‘Of all the strange marks of Egyptian zeal, the strangest is, they deify (εἶναι τὸ νομίσαι ... *ισόθεον*) the eel’.

Antiphanes the Comic Poet frag. 174.

τι θεός; τὸ κρατοῦν. Τὶ βασιλεύς; *ισόθεος* ‘What is a god? Exercising power; what is a king? One who is equal with a God’.

*P. Heid.* 1716 Verso, lines 1–2 (second cent. C.E.).

## Type 3: Substantive

4 texts (3% of texts)

Lucius Vaccius Labeo, gymnasiarch to Cyme, ‘continued to live according to what had already been granted and to adapt his own fortune to what was accessible to a man (τοῖς ἐφικτοῖσιν ἀνθρώπων). He declined the excessive honour (τὰν ... ὑπερβάρεια ... τιμὰν παρητήσατο), fitting to gods and *the god-equal* (θεοῖσι καὶ τοῖς ἰσοθέοισι ἀρμόζουσιν)—of dedicating a sanctuary and naming him “Founder”—thinking it to be enough to have observed the judgement and good will of the people, but the honours suitable to good men he accepted with gratification’.

*I Cyme* 19 lines 13–20 (2 B.C.E. – 14 C.E.).

Phil 2:6c fits none of these three types of construction. But two of the examples on the handout illustrate the way the expected readers of *verses 9–11* of Phil 2 would view the giving of the name above all names and the acclamation of all creation as typical of a description of God-equal honours.

Some publications have given the impression that Phil 2:6c is comparable to texts exemplifying our fourth type:

## Type 4: Adverbial statements for which the honourers are the acting subject

20 texts (11%)

In these, an adverbial ‘in a manner equal with the gods/with a god’, modifies a verb of which the human community is the subject.

On his visit to the underworld, Odysseus meets the departed Achilleus and tells him.

‘Achilleus, no man before has been more blessed than you, nor ever will be. Before, when you were alive, we Argives honoured you as we did the gods (ἐτίομεν ἴσα θεοῖσιν Ἀργεῖοι), and now in this place you have great authority over the dead’. Homer *Od.* 11.482–86

In the second century C.E. guide to the Bosphorus by Dionysius of Byzantium there is a description of a place where there is ...

‘... a temple of Ptolemy Philadelphus, whom the Byzantines honoured in the manner of a god (τοῦτον ἐτίμησαν ἴσα θεῷ Βυζάντιοι), having enjoyed the benefit of his greatness of mind and an honour he paid their city, for he granted them lands in Asia and a great quantity of grain and missiles and goods’. Dionysius of Byzantium *Voyage through the Bosphorus* 41 (second cent. C.E.)

I count 20 examples of this type of construction. But Phil 2:6c is not one of them, since *in the Pauline passage the words ἴσα θεῷ do not qualify a verb of which human worshippers are the subject.* In Philippians 2 Christ is the implied subject of the articular infinitive τὸ εἶναι: Christ reckons on the matter of ‘his own being (τὸ εἶναι), that is ἴσα θεῷ’.

There are two types of divine equality statement in which the exalted human individual is *the subject* of the verb. In the type that I number Type 6 a verb or verbal construct ‘to make equal’ or ‘declare equal’ is used:

## Type 6: Verbal statements of divine equality

8 texts (5.5% of texts)

Ἡρακλῆς ἰσοθεωθεὶς καὶ παρὰ Διὸς ἐστιώμενος ἕνα ἕκαστον τῶν θεῶν μετὰ πολλῆς φιλοφροσύνης ἠσπάζετο. ‘When Heracles had been made equal with the gods and he was received by Zeus, he was warmly greeted by every one of the gods’.

Aesop *Fables* 111.

On Nero: ‘But even when he disappears he will be destructive. Then he will return declaring himself equal to God (ἰσάζων θεῷ αὐτόν). But he will prove that he is not’.

*Sib. Or.* 5:33–34.

Obviously, Phil 2:6 is not a Type 6 statement since it does not employ a verb meaning ‘to make or declare equal’, rather it uses the well-attested adverbial expression ἴσα θεῶν. So we are taken back to Type 5, for which there are 7 extant examples. Because Phil 2:6c is a Type 5 construction I give you all but one of the known cases (though there is not time to give them all the close analysis that they deserve).

## Type 5: Adverbial statements for which the god-equal individual is the subject of the verb

Although this type of syntax is rare, its appearance, twice, in Homer gave it an enduring significance. The first Homer text—in the fifth book of the *Iliad* that is devoted to the great deeds of the Argive Diomedes, son of Tydeus—nicely illustrates the construction. Diomedes, under the direction and support of Athena, attacks Apollo, as the far-sighted god attempts to remove the injured Aeneas from the battle field. Diomedes had just successfully wounded the hand of the goddess Aphrodite. So Apollo warns Diomedes:

‘Now as these were talking in this way with each other Diomedes of the great war cry made for Aeneas. Though he saw how Apollo himself held his hands over him he did not shrink even from the great god, but forever forward drove, to kill Aeneas and strip his glorious armour. Three times, furious to cut him down, he drove forward, and three times Apollo battered aside the bright shield, but as a fourth time, like more than a man (δαίμονι ἴσος), he charged, Apollo who strikes from afar cried out to him in the voice of terror: ‘Take care, give back, son of Tydeus. You do not want to think the way the gods do (μηδὲ θεοῖσιν ἴσ’ ἔθελε φρονέειν), since never the same is the breed of gods, who are immortal, and men who walk groundling (ἐπεὶ οὐ ποτε φύλον ὁμοῖον ἀθανάτων τε θεῶν χαμαὶ ἐρχομένων τ’ ἀνθρώπων)’.

Homer *Iliad* 5:431–442.

Here ἴσα θεοῖσιν modifies φρονέειν. Diomedes should not think (of himself and his military capabilities) the way the gods do. Syntax and meaning are similar in a passage in *Iliad* book 21 where the gods Scamander and Simoeis conspire against Achilles to ...

The river god Scamander speaks to the river god Simoeis about the hero Achilles: ‘Beloved brother, let even the two of us join to hold back the strength of a man, since presently he will storm the great city of lord Priam. The Trojans cannot stand up to him in battle. But help me beat him off with all speed, and make full your currents with water from your springs, and rouse up all of your torrents and make a big wave rear up and wake the heavy confusion and sound of timbers and stones, so we can stop this savage man who is now in his strength and rages in fury like the immortals (ὄς δὴ νῦν κρατέει, μέμονεν δ’ ὄ γε ἴσα θεοῖσι)’.  
Homer *Il.* 21.308–315.

The next two texts are the closest to Phil 2:6c (though, strangely, none has previously figured in its interpretation).

In Homeric Hymn 5 (*To Aphrodite*), when Ganymede is taken to heaven, Zeus sends Hermes (the slayer of Argus) to tell the boy’s grieving father, Tros, that his son ‘would be (ἔοι) immortal and unageing equally with the gods (ἴσα θεοῖσιν)’.

‘Verily wise Zeus carried off golden-haired Ganymede because of his beauty, to be amongst the Deathless Ones (ἴν’ ἀθανάτοισι μετέην) and pour drink for the gods in the

house of Zeus — [205] a wonder to see—honoured by all the immortals as he draws the red nectar from the golden bowl. But grief that could not be soothed filled the heart of Tros (Ganymede’s father); for he knew not whither the heaven-sent whirlwind had caught up his dear son, so that he mourned him always, unceasingly, [210] until Zeus pitied him and gave him high-stepping horses such as carry the immortals (τ’ ἀθανάτους) as recompense for his son. These he gave him as a gift. And at the command of Zeus, the Guide, the slayer of Argus, told him all, and that his son would be immortal and unageing equally with the gods (ὡς ἔοι ἀθάνατος καὶ ἀγήρωσ ἴσα θεοῖσιν). [215] So when Tros heard these tidings from Zeus, he no longer kept mourning but rejoiced in his heart and rode joyfully with his storm-footed horses’.

Homeric Hymns 5 (*To Aphrodite*) 202–217 (late C7th and mid-C6th B.C.E.)

Here an adverbial ἴσα θεοῖσιν qualifies a form of the verb ‘to be’ (ἔοι—the optative third singular), as does the ἴσα θεῶ in Phil 2:6. The passage is exceptional in describing a heavenly, not an earthly, ‘god-equal manner of existence’, in a way that is, we shall see, not far from the ‘being in a manner equal to God’ in Philippians.

The sense of the ἔοι here is also instructive. It exemplifies the fact that, as Charles Kahn has shown in his studies on Greek εἰμί, the Greek verb, unlike modern equivalents, can have a durative sense of ‘to live, be alive, to dwell, be present, or be available’.<sup>16</sup> Ganymede exists and has a lifestyle in a manner equal to the gods.

In a similar vein—this is the fourth text—Pseudo-Perictione *On the Harmony of Women* says that parents exist (πέλουσι) and effect or manage everything for their offspring ἴσα θεοῖσι (‘in a manner equal to the gods’).

‘One must revere the gods in the confident hope of happiness, obeying both ancestral laws and institutions. After these, I say to honour and to revere one’s parents, for they are and effect everything equally to the gods for their offspring (οὗτοι γὰρ ἴσα θεοῖσι πάντα πέλουσι καὶ πρήσσουσι τοῖς ἐγγόνουσι)’.

Pseudo-Perictione *On the Harmony of Women* 1 (C3rd or C4th B.C.E.)

Finally, the last two texts employ an adverbial god-equal syntax for rulers. In 2 Macc 9:12 Antiochus Epiphanes confesses that it is not right, being a mortal, *to think in a god-equal manner* ἰσόθεα φρονεῖν, as he has done in the previous 10 verses where he imagines that he can weigh the mountains and command the waves of the sea.

Antiochus IV confesses ‘Δίκαιον ὑποτάσσεσθαι τῷ θεῷ καὶ μὴ θνητὸν ὄντα ἰσόθεα φρονεῖν’ ‘It is right to be subject to God and not, being a mortal, to think in a god-equal manner’.

2 Maccabees 9:12 (ἰσόθεα: neut. plu. adv. of ἰσόθεος).

On Hektor(?) ‘And mu]ch more being in the go[od fortu]ne of men . . . , but he did not thin[k] the way the gods think (ἴσα θε[οῖσιν] ἐφρόνε[ι]), and he contended with the gods themselves’.

Philodemus *On the Good King according to Homer* (*P. Herc.* 1507) col. 36, lines 6–11. (57–55 B.C.E.).

<sup>16</sup> See C. H. Kahn, *The verb 'be' and its synonyms* (Reidel: Dordrecht, 1973); idem, ‘A Return to the Theory of the Verb Be and the Concept of Being’, *Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004), 381–405; idem, *Essays on being*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009).

In Philodemus of Gadara’s treatise expounding the lessons for leadership in Homer, a badly damaged column 36 uses a Type 5 ἴσα θε[οῖς] expression in a way that is not entirely clear, but is certainly applied to the issue of a ruler’s right conduct. Probably in 2 Macc 9:12 and certainly in the case of Philodemus, the verb φρονεῖν with an adverbial ἴσα + θεός is one point in set of allusions to *Iliad* 5:441–2. These two texts—the closest in date to Philippians—therefore suggest that the rare Type 5 divine equality construction would sound Homeric to a first century audience.

## 5. Results of analysis of inventory of 140+ comparable Greek texts

Phil 2:6c is a Type 5 construction and from this all-too-brief survey of the linguistic data the following 5 conclusions can be drawn:

1. **Syntactic boundaries were not blurred.** Following the example set by Homer, whose epics were set texts in primary-through-tertiary education for Greek speakers, authors spoke in syntactically discrete ways about divine equality. They distinguished clearly between adjectival and adverbial constructions. Sometimes their focus was the god-equal honorific action of human worshippers, sometimes it was the *status* of god-like individuals, and in occasionally it was the god-equal conduct or manner of existence of those individuals (Type 5 constructions).<sup>17</sup> There is no reason to doubt that the author of Phil 2:6 choose a Type 5 syntax fully aware of its meaning.
2. **The divine equality in Phil 2:6 cannot refer to Christ’s a post-exaltation status.** If τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ means ‘being in a manner equal with God’ it cannot be a forward-looking reference to Christ’s posthumous state and status, as laid out in vv. 9–11, where the stress is on Christ’s passive reception of divine action and cosmic response. It must, therefore, refer to something that characterizes Christ already in heavenly pre-existence, in a way analogous to Ganymedes’ being ἴσα θεοῖσιν on Mount Olympus. It could, also, conceivably have in view what happens in Christ’s becoming a human.
3. **The language is royal.** Divine equality language is used most often to describe heroes, powerful and highly esteemed rulers, kings and emperors. Of the Hellenistic period texts that *use god-equal language for persons*, 85% have in view a king or ruler. Other features of the hymnic piece present Christ as a royal or imperial figure. So, there should be no doubt that *in the context of this first century hymnic piece*, τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ *is language that implies one who is a divine ruler.*

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<sup>17</sup> God-equal language flowed down well-worn semantic channels, with conventional, stereotyped, terms appearing according to context and type. Divine equality is often something to which an individual *attains* (τυγχάνω), because they are *judged worthy* (ἀξιωθῆναι) of it (e.g. Diodorus Siculus 1.97.6 says Daedalus was ‘accorded great glory because of his genius and, after making many discoveries, was judged worthy (ἀξιωθέντα) ... to receive god-equal honors (τυχεῖν ἰσοθέων τιμῶν)’, cf. 1.24.7–8; 4.58.6; Artapanus frag. 3.6; Polybius 10.10.11; Dionysius of Halicarnasus 1.44.1–2; Philo *Moses* 2.194), and that public bodies *decree* (with δοκέω, νομίζω) or that individuals *consider and perceive* (νομίζω, ἠγέομαι). For νομίζω see e.g. Isocrates *Nicoles* 5; Antiphanes frag. 174 line 2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ars. Rhet.* 7.7.7; Lucian *Anacharsis* 10. For νομίζω used for the perception of the god-equal see Isocrates *Nicoles* 5; Antipater *On Marriage* (cited above). For ἠγέομαι see Eur. *IA* 67; Plato *Phaed.* 258c; Philostratus *Letters of Apollonius* 44:1; Lucian *Dem.* 7).

4. **Probably**, the Type 5 syntax of v. 6c evokes the archaic poetry of Homer: in that case, the hymn begins with an echo of the Greek ‘Bible’, just as it ends with a midrashic citation of Israel’s prophetic scriptures—Isaiah 45:23.<sup>18</sup>

5. **In two ways, our Pauline verse stands out against the Greco-Roman sources.**

(a) In every other text, humans have divine equality either during their life on earth, or after death. Ours is the only case where divine equality is applied to a pre-existent phase of life.

(b) τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ is the only text in which an *infinitive* τὸ εἶναι ‘being’ is modified by an adverbial or adjectival ‘divine equality’ expression. Here then we have an unparalleled statement about—and a *reckoning in regard to a particular kind of*—‘being’ itself.

Furthermore, ‘the being (τὸ εἶναι)’ about which Christ reckons has a particular manner that makes it a transcendent, metaphysical, kind of being; it is a being in the manner of *God*.

In the case of the other Type 5 constructions the sense of the adverbial construction can be spelt out in English by the repetition of the verb. Apollo warns Diomedes: ‘you don’t want to think the way the gods *think*’. Achilles is ‘even minded in a manner equal to the way the gods *are minded*’ (*Il.* 21:315). Antiochus confesses that it is not right for mortals ‘to think the same way the gods *think*’ (2 Macc 9:12). Presumably, then, Phil 2:6c should be translated ‘being in a manner equal to *God’s manner of being*’.

In the rest of this paper I offer an explanation for both the author’s choice of a Type 5 syntax and the distinctive, unparalleled, features of this Type 5 text.

## 6. Being in a divine manner and Christ’s divine self-transformation

... the fact that v. 6c speaks of (an adverbial) ‘god-equal manner or mode’ makes excellent sense given other features of the hymn that have come to the fore in recent scholarship.

As I noted at the beginning, our hymn says that the pre-existent Christ came to earth in an act of divine self-transformation, like that of the pagan gods’ self-transformations. So we can now say that, in taking the form of a slave, in his self-transformative ‘becoming (γενόμενος)’ human, Christ demonstrates or reveals what it means ‘to exist, to live, to be (τὸ εἶναι) in a manner equal with God (ἴσα θεῶ)’.

Such a conclusion makes sense of the syntax of the first verses of the hymn. The words τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ govern an οὐκ ... ἀλλά ‘not that ... but this’ construction. Christ reckoned τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ (direct object) not *harpagmos* (indirect object), but rather emptied himself (taking the way of humble human service unto death). So, the semantic structure is:

ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων  
 ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ  
 οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν,  
 ἀλλὰ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων  
 γενόμενος ... ἐταπείνωσεν ἐαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου,  
 θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ.

So, whilst the οὐχ ... ἀλλά construction denies that ‘being in a manner equal with God’ is *harpagmos* (marriage by abduction, rape), it most naturally means that, somehow, such a manner of being is constituted by, to be identified with, or is manifest in, all that happens in vv. 7–8. In the syntax of Phil

<sup>18</sup> For this view see Ellis, *Grammar as Theology*, 281–83.

2:6–8, where τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ governs an οὐκ . . . ἀλλά construction, the semantic unit τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ is equated with the action ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφῆν δούλου λαβῶν κ.τ.λ.

This is the natural, and surely only way, to take vv. 6–8 because Christ is the assumed subject of the verbs throughout. He is the subject of the verb ἠγήσατο and of the preceding ὑπάρχων, and he is the subject of the verbs that follow ἐκένωσεν, λαβῶν, γενόμενος, ἐταπείνωσεν and a second γενόμενος. So, the dense poetry can be filled out this way:

Who, because he was in the form of God,  
reckoned (his) being (that is) in a manner equal with God's manner of being  
**not** rape or marriage by abduction,  
**but** (instead), he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . .

Not this, but that; not the sexual predation of the pagan gods (and their would-be representatives on earth, the emperors), but rather a life poured out in humble service of all humanity. Being that is in a manner equal with God is not the false gods' sexual *consuming* of individuals—pretty girls and boys—but incarnation towards a mutually beneficial *consummation* of heaven and earth (completed in the future according to Phil 3:20–21).

## 7. τὸ εἶναι: divine 'being' (that 'becomes')

That, I hope, explains the adverbial ἴσα θεῶ that has been a stumbling block to so many. I now turn to the articular infinitive τὸ εἶναι 'being'.

The popular view that the gods can self-transform and *become* human (for a brief span) was opposed by the Philosophers. Their objections were moral—the gods do not deceive and steal through disguise—and also metaphysical. Plato advocated a distinction between the ideal divine realm that is characterised by stable, invisible but rationally intelligible, 'being (τὸ ὄν, οὐσία)' and the created, sensible, ever changing, compounded, and unstable realm of 'generation (γένεσις)' and 'what becomes (τὸ γινόμενον)' (esp. *Tim.* 27d–28a, cf. *Phaedo* 78c–d; *Symp.* 210e–211b; *Theaet.* 152d–153e; *Soph.* 248a–249d). The divine is immortal, unchangeable, free from the contingencies that define the world of human experience. The gods, who belong to the realm of 'being', cannot 'become' (*Rep.* 380c–381d, 382e–383a, *Tim.* 27d, 52a, cf. Plutarch *On the E* 21 [*Mor.* 393f–394a]): they do not self-transform and take on a human likeness. Hence Plato's famous disdain for poetry and its myths.

Platonists in the first century took up a variety of positions on the many complexities of their master's account of reality, but they took for granted the axiomatic distinction between being and becoming. Some made the dualism more rigid than it had been for their master.<sup>19</sup> Any first century C.E. description of a divine 'being' that 'becomes' in the human realm would therefore invite a Platonist's censure. For the most part, Greek and Roman authors, artists and actors who espoused stories of the gods' self-transformations carried on regardless. Some who were Philosophically sensitive attempted to overcome such objections to the olden, culturally canonical, stories of the gods' becomings by allegorical interpretation. By contrast, the author of Phil 2:6, I contend, confronts the Platonic objection head on. That he does so has escaped modern commentators' attention because τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῶ has been mistranslated, obscuring the reference to 'being' in τὸ εἶναι, and because the divine self-

<sup>19</sup> For a strongly dualistic version of the distinction between being and becoming see the speech attributed to Ammonius, Plutarch's Athenian teacher, in Plutarch *On the E* 17–21 (*Mor.* 391e–394c).

transformation language in vv. 6–8 has been either ignored or its significance not fully appreciated.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps also because there has been, in much modern NT scholarship, an influential anti-Platonist (and anti-Philosophical) stance.

In any case, there are several reasons to be certain that in vv. 6–8 the ideal reader is invited to hear a Platonic discourse in order to make a pointed challenge to a rigid dualism between God and the world that would deny the possibility of incarnation. Verse 6 does not attempt a speculative engagement with the complexities of middle Platonism, but it does offer a new, counter, proposal for the relationship between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.

The first point to be made is linguistic. In Phil 2:6c, τὸ εἶναι means ‘being’. The articular infinitive τὸ εἶναι can sometimes be used predicatively (as it can in English, for example, in the sentence ‘*being* the fastest in her class, she won the race’),<sup>21</sup> but here it is used absolutely (as in the English ‘the mystic sat cross-legged and meditated on the nature of ‘Being’’). Now the Platonists’ distinction between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (γίνομαι), is reflected in the movement from v. 6 ‘*being* in a manner equal with God’ to Christ’s ‘*becoming* (γενόμενος)’ in vv. 7–8.

Of course, Plato himself employed the participle forms ὄν and οὐσία to speak of ‘being’, so it is understandable that, given the absence of those words in Phil 2:6, commentators have not considered the language philosophical. But on occasion Plato himself used τὸ εἶναι to speak of the ‘being’ that he otherwise labelled ‘absolute essence (αὐτὴ ἢ οὐσία)’ and (τὸ) ὄν.<sup>22</sup> And, soon after Plato, Aristotle used τὸ εἶναι as a synonym for (τὸ) ὄν.<sup>23</sup> Most importantly of all, for the middle Platonism of the first century C.E., both τὸ εἶναι and the verb ὑπάρχω (as in Phil 2:6a) (along with its nominal derivative ὑπαρξις ‘existence, reality, substance’) had become part of the linguistic repertoire of discussions of ‘being’. Consider these examples from Philo of Alexandria, an author who can often be treated as a reliable witness to the language and conceptual structure of Platonic discourse in the first century.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Worse Attacks the Better* 160 Philo brings together Plato and Moses in an exegesis of the law-givers’ setting up of the Tent of Meeting in Exod 33:7:

<sup>20</sup> For other reasons to suppose that modern scholarship has suffered ‘an ideologically driven refusal to acknowledge Platonic elements in Paul’s thought’ see Stowers, S., ‘Paul and the terrain of philosophy’, *Early Christianity* 6 (2015), pp. 141–56 (p. 143).

<sup>21</sup> Paul sometimes uses τὸ εἶναι predicatively in an articular infinitive construction, after εἰς (Rom 1:20; 3:26; 4:16; 8:29; 15:16; 1 Cor 10:6; Eph 1:12; cf. Jas 1:18; 1 Cor 7:26 Cf. LXX Gen 5:3; 1 Kgs 8:16; 2 Kgs 1:3, 6; 1 Macc 6:53; 11:2; 2 Macc 3:38). Neither the NT (apart from in Phil 2:6) or the LXX ever uses τὸ εἶναι for the absolute ‘Being’.

<sup>22</sup> Plato *Phaed.* 78d, cf. *Parm.* 162a, *Thaet.* 188c-d, and note the instances of τὸ μὴ εἶναι ‘not-being’ (e.g. *Rep.* 5:479c and *Theaet.* 185c).

<sup>23</sup> *Analytica priora et posteriora* 34a 5–6, 16, 24; 53b 12–13. For τὸ εἶναι as ‘being’ note already Parmenides’ εἶναι for ‘being’ in *On Nature* frag. 4 τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι ‘for the same thing is for conceiving as is for being’ and frag. 5.1–2 ‘*χρὴ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ’ ἐὸν ἔμμεναι ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι, μὴδὲν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν* ‘It is necessary to assert and conceive that this is Being. For it is being, but Nothing is not’ (following the translation in A. H. Coxon and R. D. McKirahan, *The fragments of Parmenides: a critical text with introduction and translation, the ancient Testimonia and a commentary*, (Rev. ed.; Parmenides: Las Vegas, 2009), p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> For a recent discussion of Philo’s Platonism see M. Bonazzi, ‘Towards Transcendence: Philo and the Renewal of Platonism in the Early Imperial Age’, in F. Alesse (ed), *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy* (Brill: Leiden), pp. 233–51. For Philo’s acceptance of the basic Platonic dichotomy between being and becoming see D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (Brill: Leiden, 1986), pp. 92–103.

Of this tent he says that it has received the title of ‘Tent of Testimony,’ using his words advisedly, in order that it (the tent) might be *of the one who IS* (ἵν’ ἡ τοῦ ὄντος ὑπάρχη), and not merely receive the title. For among the virtues, the virtue of God is according to truth, constituted according to *being* (κατὰ τὸ εἶναι συνεστῶσα), since God alone subsists in *being* (ὁ θεὸς μόνος ἐν τῷ εἶναι ὑφέστηκεν). This is why, of necessity,<sup>25</sup> he will say of himself, ‘I am He that is’ (ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὄν) (Exod 3:14) implying that others after Him are not of that which IS, *according to being* (οὐκ ὄντων κατὰ τὸ εἶναι), but are reckoned to subsist only by opinion.<sup>26</sup>

Philo hangs typically Platonic ways of speaking about ‘being’ (τοῦ ὄντος, ὄντων) on the biblical revelation of God’s self-disclosure as יהוה אשׁר יהוה at the story of the burning bush (Exod 3:14), for which the LXX had already provided a Platonic-sounding ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὄν.<sup>27</sup> And the Alexandrian three times uses the articular infinitive of ‘to be’ (τὸ εἶναι) in a way that is more or less synonymous with the neuter singular participle τὸ ὄν, ‘being’. He also uses the verb ὑπάρχω, though in a less obviously technical sense.

In his *Special Laws* 1:41 the combination τὸ εἶναι and ὑπάρχειν is more prominent:

To which having regard, the hierophant and most beloved of God, Moses, entreated God, saying, ‘Show yourself to me’ (Exod 33:13), all but possessed and crying out directly, ‘Of your being and existence (τοῦ μὲν εἶναί σε καὶ ὑπάρχειν) this world has become my teacher and guide, as a son teaching me about his father and as a work about its manufacturer. But, being desirous to know what you are in essence (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν), I can find none in any parts of the whole to be an instructor in this lesson.’<sup>28</sup>

Here both τὸ εἶναι and his ὑπάρχειν denote ‘being’ and ‘existence’ in a way that defers to a Platonic account of reality. That which Moses ‘has regard to’ at the start of this section is the quest for God’s essence (οὐσία) and the vision of ‘God as he truly is (τὸν ὄντως ὄντα θεὸν)’. And, in what follows this excerpt, the divine answer to Moses’ entreaty is couched in terms that assume a categorical distinction between divine being and creation—‘that which has become (γένεσις)’ (§43)—because of which God offers to Moses a limited, intellectual, vision of the divine powers which he identifies with Plato’s ‘forms’ (§§43–50).

Although ὑπάρχω and ὑπαρξίν are not prevalent in such contexts, other Philonic passages show that the articular infinitive τὸ εἶναι for ‘being’, with a sense either synonymous with, or cognate to, Plato’s τὸ ὄν, was a common place in first century Alexandrian Platonic discourse.<sup>29</sup> And the fact that a similar linguistic pattern is present in Plutarch’s versions of a Platonic ontology, shows that in

<sup>25</sup> The Greek is ἀναγκαίως which F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *Philo. Volume 10* (Heinemann: London, 1929) p. 497 point out is indebted to the technical use of that word in Plato *Timaeus* 69D.

<sup>26</sup> My translation.

<sup>27</sup> For Philo’s debt to LXX Exod 3:14 see the texts discussed in G. E. Sterling, ‘The People of the Covenant or the People of God. Exodus in Philo of Alexandria’, in T. B. Dozeman, C. A. Evans and J. N. Lohr (eds), *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (Brill: Leiden), pp. 418–21.

<sup>28</sup> My translation.

<sup>29</sup> See also *Unchangeableness* 119; *Decalogue* 111; *Life of Moses* 2:267 all of which speak of a kind of creation that is ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι and *On the Change of Names* 11; *Migration* 40, 182; *Life of Moses* 1:75; 2:100; *Special Laws* 4:187; *Virtues* 130; *Questions on Genesis* 2:13.

this respect Philo represents a Mediterranean-wide first century development of Philosophical language.<sup>30</sup> [See handout for Plutarch texts].

So, it cannot be a mere happenstance that the first two phases of Paul's Christ hymn—the one describing Christ's pre-incarnate and the other the incarnate stage of Christ's biography—are neatly balanced by two-fold 'being' and a repeated 'becoming' (γενόμενος). In verse 6 Christ 'being (ὑπάρχων) in the form of God' made a critical discernment about (his own) 'being (τὸ εἶναι) in a manner equal to God'. Then, in verses 7–8, he 'become (γενόμενος) in the likeness of human beings' and he 'became (γενόμενος) obedient to death'. The being–being, becoming–becoming pattern calls time on a Platonic dogma that the truly divine 'being' cannot 'become' and that the divine cannot suffer change and die.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, this subversive reduplication of Platonic-sounding terms accompanies the equally challenging repetition of the word 'form (μορφή)' in the procession from 'the form of God' (v. 6a) to the 'the form of a slave' (v. 7b). Such repetitions are a feature of the passage's poetry: notice also the doubling of the words ἄνθρωπος and θάνατος (in vv. 7, 8). The one true God—or, rather, the one who has a 'being' equal to His being—can make a change from being to becoming, just as much as he can make a change from the divine form to the form of a slave (with all that that implies for a change of status).

The philosophical connotations of the words ὑπάρχων and τὸ εἶναι as a contrast to the two-fold γενόμενος would not be missed since, in context, they are appropriate to the narrative's stage directions. In verse 6 Christ is in the heavenly realm above, with God; in verses 7–8 he is on earth, in the empirical world of human affairs. These two realms roughly equate to those that Plato and his followers labelled the realms of 'being' and 'becoming'. And that distinction was manifest supremely in the experience of 'death' to that which becomes (cf. Phil 2:8).

The attentive reader, equipped with more than a passing acquaintance with Platonic thought, would also hear in v. 7 an epistemological confirmation of the 'being-becoming' distinction. For Platonists the distinction typically meant a skepticism about what can be truly known about reality in the realm of Becoming. That which is Becoming is only an object of belief or opinion (δόξα) (*Tim.* 28a, cf. 52a,) and cannot with certainty be properly apprehended (Plato *Crat.* 439e–440b; Aristotle *Met.* 4 1010a 1–15). As Plutarch's Athenian teacher Ammonius puts it, 'everything of a mortal nature ... presents only a dim and uncertain semblance and appearance of itself' and 'our senses, through ignorance of reality, falsely tell us what appears to be' (*On the E* 18 [*Mor.* 392a–b, e]).<sup>32</sup> So it is fitting that the hymn says that in pre-existence Christ truly is 'in the form of God', but that when he became a human being he was only 'found' by others as one in the figure of a man. The divine Christ's true identity went unrecognized. Ordinary human *opinion* of him was limited. His true identity can only be known from the perspective of the heavenly realm (v. 6); what a Platonist would call the 'noetic' and 'intelligible'.

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<sup>30</sup> For τὸ εἶναι equivalent to the Platonic τὸ ὄν in contrast to 'becoming' see Plutarch *On the E* §§17, 18, 19 (*Mor.* 392a–c, 392f, 393a), and note the use of τὸ εἶναι, ὑπαρξίτιν and ὑπάρχουσιν in *Reply to Colotes* 14–16 (*Mor.* 1116b–d), where the words ὑπαρξίτιν and ὑπάρχουσιν are also used.

<sup>31</sup> For Plutarch's tutor Ammonius mythological stories of a god's 'becoming' are incredible and can only be credited to lesser divine beings—to demons (see *On the E* 21 [*Mor.* 393f–394a]).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Reply to Colotes* 13, 19 (*Mor.* 1114c–d, 1118c). On the epistemological problem of the realm of generation in Plutarch see Opsomer, 'A Profile', 153–54; M. Bonazzi, 'Plutarch and the Skeptics', in M. Beck (ed.) *A Companion to Plutarch* (Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester), pp. 126–27; H. Obsieger, *Plutarch: De E apud Delphos. Über das Epsilon am Apolltempel in Delphi: Einführung, Ausgabe und Kommentar* (Franz Steiner Verlag: Stuttgart, 2013), pp. 315–322.

A conscious dialogue with Philosophy in this Christological piece should not surprise us. In at least three other ways Philippians speaks to first century popular philosophical concerns:<sup>33</sup>

1. Throughout Paul advocates a distinctive (Christologically-grounded) form of moral reasoning, with the numerous instances of the verb φρονέω echoing one of Plato's four cardinal virtues (φρόνησις—'thoughtfulness, prudence').<sup>34</sup>
2. In 4:11–12 he affirms the stoic virtue of detachment (proclaiming its achievability 'through him who strengthens me').
3. And in 1:9–10 he adopts the position of the popular moral philosophers who helped people 'to distinguish between good and bad, advantageous and disadvantageous, helpful and harmful' (Musonius Rufus, *That Kings Should Also Study Philosophy* 2).<sup>35</sup>
4. Also, the presence of technical philosophical language in an early Christological piece is consistent with the way other texts employ contemporary prepositional metaphysics in their praise of Christ and his role in creation.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the passage articulates incarnation against a Platonic objection. It proposes, echoing Philosophical language, a dynamic divine ontology. But it is more than simply a Philosophically-sensitive apology for Christ's incarnation. It employs a sophisticated strategy, in which the hymn negotiates a distinctive place for a Christ-shaped monotheism that both affirms and challenges contemporary philosophical, political and cultural mores.

In terms of affirmation,

- (1) the passage affirms the Platonists (against the Stoics?) for their distinction between 'being' and 'becoming', and for the priority—or superiority—of the former over the latter. In this, presumably, its author found the Platonists close to their own biblical understanding of the relationship between Creator and creation.

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<sup>33</sup> For additional observations on probable philosophical discourse in Philippians see P. A. Holloway, 'Paul as Hellenistic Philosopher', in W. Blanton and H. de Vries (eds), *Paul and the Philosophers* (Fordham University Press: New York, 2103), pp. 52–68, who concludes 'Paul wrote to the Philippians as a philosopher—a Christianizing philosopher, to be sure, but a philosopher nonetheless' (p. 67).

<sup>34</sup> Paul uses the word seven times in Philippians (1:7; 2:2, 5; 3:15, 19; 4:2, 10), more than in any other letter.

<sup>35</sup> For Paul's prayer that the Philippians are able to determine τὰ διαφέροντα (1:10) see the comparable Philosophical texts in P. Holloway, *Philippians*, p. 78 n. 67 and *idem* 'Paul as Hellenistic Philosopher,' pp. 63–65.

<sup>36</sup> On the Philosophical background of 'from whom', 'to/for whom', 'through whom' in 1 Cor 8:6, the 'in him', 'through him', 'to/for him' in Col 1:15–20, and the 'through him' of John 1:3, 10 and Heb 1:2 see G. Sterling, 'Prepositional Metaphysics in Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Early Christian Liturgical Texts', *SPhA* 9 (1997), pp. 219–38. For notable recent contributions to the case for thinking that Pauline theology had Platonic influences see the work of George van Kooten (in his *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* (WUNT 232, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2008) and Emma Wasserman (for example, in her 'Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide? The Case of Pauline Anthropology in Romans 7 and 2 Cor 4–5', in S. Porter and A. Pitts (eds), *Christian Origins and Hellenistic Judaism: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament* (Brill: Leiden), pp. 259–79).

- (2) Secondly, the passage affirms the philosophical endeavour. Verse 6 says that Christ reckoned rightly on the matter of the divine ‘being’. *This pre-incarnate Messiah philosophised*. He modelled an ability to discern correctly, something that Paul, at the start of his letter (in 1:9–11), prays his readers would learn. Also, the first half of the hymn (vv. 6–8) agrees with the philosophical view that reality is not what it seems to mere sense perception. There is a higher divine realm wherein the divine exists in its own proper ‘form’. The truth of God’s relation to, or presence in, the world, must be discerned.
- (3) Thirdly, the hymn affirms the prevalent political view that the world is best governed by a figure who is both human and divine; a god-equal king or emperor.
- (4) And it affirms the age-old pagan conviction that the divine (the gods or God) is so interested in humanity that it self-transforms, *becomes* (or *has become*) to be one with us. In this regard the hymn sides with the majority who disdained a Philosophically-motivated austere, speculative, attitude towards popular religion.

So, there is challenge:

- (1) The passage rejects a Platonic dualism that rules out the possibility of incarnation.
- (2) It insists that the ultimate act of divine self-transformation took place in this particular historical event; in a whole human life ending in death, not a fleeting visit. The visitation was motivated by a desire for humanity *as a species*, not just for the beautiful individual, nor to satisfy a superhuman sexual appetite.
- (3) That means that it presents Christ’s life as a revelation of that after which the philosophers searched: here was divine ‘being’, hidden in our midst, as a servant. But the ‘being’ that is in view in the τὸ εἶναι of v. 6 is not an abstract, hypostatized, ‘Being’, but the ‘being’ that characterizes, and that belongs to, *a particular person*, namely the one who, through the full course of his heavenly and earthly life, is revealed as ‘equal in conduct to God the Father’.
- (4) Lastly it leverages the notion that ‘being’ is ontologically prior, and superior, to ‘becoming’ in order to assert a distinctive position for Christ’s identity in relation to prevalent views about what it is to be a ‘divine’ ruler. For Greeks and Romans a human ruler could become ‘divine’ as a result of great deeds—conquests, civic and universal benefactions—wisdom and virtue. Divinity was achieved, or earned, and granted by a worshipping community (and its official bodies; in Rome, the Senate). *But Paul’s Christ hymn subordinates politics to metaphysics*; conduct in the human realm to a divine identity above and beyond history. Christ was not a human being who became divine, he is a divine *being* who *became* a human.