Christ Hymn

Philippians 2:5-11 is the earliest Christian hymn that is known. It is generally called the Christ Hymn, but it is also called the Philippian Hymn by some. Debate does exist (as usual) about whether the initial verses in the Christ Hymn refer to the preexistent divinity of Christ Jesus or not. The traditional interpretation is that they do. The interpretation that they do not do so has emerged relatively recently from a broad spectrum of theologians, from conservative to progressive. The traditional interpretation is assumed here because a great deal of evidence supports it, the most important piece of which will be summarized first. Then, the focus of attention will turn to the theological import of the passage, based on the traditional interpretation that the preexistent Christ Jesus was divine.

It must be noted that in the Christ Hymn the Greek word for "form" or "nature" (*morphe*) is used twice, the first time in reference to the relation of Christ Jesus to God (verse 6), and the second time in reference to Jesus being a servant (verse 7). If he was a servant in his essential nature, then he was divine in his essential nature also before his transformation into a human being.

The message of the Christ Hymn is that the preexistent and divine Christ Jesus emptied himself to become a human being (verses 6-7). Paul presents the emptying as complete. Although far beyond our imagination, a straightforward simplicity is also in view. Christ Jesus laid aside His divinity completely for our sake and became a human being. He was born as the baby of a humble woman named Mary. Theologians throughout history have avoided the concept of the complete transformation of the divine Christ Jesus into a human being. Theories have been put forth concerning how humanity and divinity inhere in the one person of Jesus Christ. Theories are not Christian doctrine, but this has not stopped the program of theologians since the time of the early Church creeds. One of these theories is kenosis theology which focuses on how Jesus expressed his divine nature within the constraints of human existence. The other theory is the theology of the hypostatic union, which is the effort of theologians to set forth the doctrine of the dual nature of Jesus Christ as simultaneously divine and human. The doctrine of the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ traces to the Chalcedonian and Athanasian creeds (451 CE and c. 500 CE respectively). These were highly influential Church documents which codified the doctrine. In contrast to the theories of kenosis theology and the theology of the hypostatic union, the Christ Hymn is presented by Paul as a straightforward anchor for belief in Jesus Christ. On Paul's straightforward presentation of the complete transformation of the divine Christ Jesus into a human being, the way is opened for believers to adopt the Lord's servant attitude for themselves. This is Paul's point in the passage (verse 5). The stunning nature of Christ Jesus' selfless act of transformation to save human beings is plain to see. And so, his servant attitude becomes the model for believers. In its simplicity, this message soars above the theories of kenosis theology and the theology of the hypostatic union.

One wonders what the music of the Hymn was like because the words of the Hymn are strongly sequential-- from the preexistent divinity of Christ Jesus, through his act of emptying himself, to become a servant, indeed a human being, who humbled himself, and died on a cross. The Lord marched right to his death (verse 8). The Apostle John, in the prologue of his Gospel, corroborates Paul's essential message by saying that the preexistent and divine Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:1; 1:14).

The straightforward interpretation of this passage leads to a clear understanding of the nature of Jesus the man, but the doctrine of the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Christ is thoroughly entrenched in the Athanasian Creed and thereby in the doctrinal statements of the various Western churches which adopted the Creed, including the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches as well as many other protestant denominations. So, it is difficult for many people to take a step back from their theological position and reconsider the teaching of the Christ Hymn.

A commonsense failure of the traditional view of the dual nature of Christ has to do with the question of what happened when Jesus died because a divine Person cannot die.

Conservative theologians as well as others in the conservative churches have missed the boat on the Christ Hymn. Theologians have endeavored to harmonize OT monotheism with their view of the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ through the doctrine of the Trinity. It is evident that the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ in conservative theology, and indeed in the Athanasian Creed, is inseparably linked to the doctrine of the Trinity. Carl Henry presented a very concise formulation of the traditional doctrines of God and Christ with these words: "In the NT, God's glory is manifested in the incarnation of the Logos, bearing the express image of the divine in human nature. Nowhere does the NT emphasis on the deity of Christ, or its trinitarian statements, deviate in the slightest from the uncompromising monotheism of the OT; both Testaments deplore polytheism" ("Trinity," *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible,* Volume 5*,* 2009, p. 2348). Theologians since Hilary of Poitiers (*De Trinitate,* c. 360 CE) and Augustine (*De Trinitate,* c. 425 CE) have become lost in theories about the oneness of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and no way out of the morass exists other than to begin by taking a step back on the Christ Hymn and reinterpreting it in a straightforward manner.

Finding a true doctrine of God is also a simple matter. Theologians and others only need to take a straightforward look at Paul's teaching about the one God. The apostle's teaching is decisive and very simple. If one looks carefully at Paul's writings, one will find repeatedly the identification of God as the Father. This occurs many times in Paul. In Ephesians 4:6, Paul identifies the one God as the Father, and he does this in the context of a deep meditation on oneness. Also, in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 Paul is addressing the problem of idolatry and the truth that there is but one God, and in this context, Paul identifies the one God as the Father. He goes on to identify Jesus Christ as our only Lord. Paul also at the end of his quote of the Christ Hymn completes his words of the exaltation of Jesus Christ by identifying God as the Father (Philippians 2:9-11). The Hymn also states that Jesus Christ must be confessed as Lord (Philippians 2:11). These texts, and many others like them, need to be taken at face value. Paul simply identifies the one God as the Father, and his epistles are replete with this teaching.

Jesus Christ is now a glorified human being and the Lord of all creation. Every tongue will confess him as Lord (Philippians 2:11). Theologians can explore the scriptural teaching about the Holy Spirit. He is surely divine, but Paul clearly points to the preeminence of God the Father in Philippians 2:11 and in other epistles as has already been shown. The preeminence of God the Father is observed at many points in scripture outside of the Pauline epistles including the Gospel of John which says that the Lord asked the Father to send believers the Holy Spirit, who will be their advocate forever (John 14:16-17). Theologians should explore what the scripture teaches about the matter of the Father's preeminence.

The concern of trinitarian theologians-- that the existence of three divine Persons at the creation of the cosmos constitutes polytheism unless we assert their mysterious ontological unity-- is unwarranted. The authors of the NT never present such teaching. The reason is that no issue existed in the minds of the NT writers. Trinitarian theologians themselves have simply not come to terms with the progress of revelation.

We have a new testimony that affirms the existence of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and traditional trinitarian theologians cannot bring themselves to let that testimony stand on its own. These theologians feel compelled to differentiate NT testimony from all the various false polytheistic systems by adding to the NT testimony the doctrine of the Trinity. What really differentiates NT testimony from all the various kinds of polytheism is that NT testimony is true and pagan polytheism is false. Believers need to take a step back and reconsider the matter.

The Christian testimony concerning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is surely subject to the charge of polytheism. This is a facet of the stumbling block of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Romans 9:30-33). Christians should not try to side-step the stumbling block in their proclamation of the good news. However, highly influential trinitarian theologians in the early centuries CE, like Augustine, surely tried to avoid the charge of polytheism by adding to the NT testimony the assertion that three divine Persons are mysteriously one God. Instead of trying to avoid the charge of polytheism, believers should simply be witnesses to the truth of the NT testimony concerning the Father, Son, and Spirit, and assert its triumph over the false pagan polytheistic systems. Believers should refuse to offer any rationalization of the stumbling block of the NT testimony (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

The power of tradition in Christianity is fierce, so the doctrine of the Trinity espoused by Augustine as well as the Athanasian Creed was propagated into the theology of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the 16th century reformers like Luther and Calvin.

Some may point to John 10:30 as a claim by Jesus himself to being divine. When the Jews took up stones to kill him, Jesus calmly pointed to the miracles he had performed and asked them for which of those miracles were they intending to stone him (verses 31-32). The Jews replied that Jesus was claiming to be God (verse 33). Jesus answered that he was only claiming to be God's son and indeed the Messiah, a man who had performed miracles from God that confirm his identity as the Messiah (verses 34-36 and see Ps. 82:6; see also verses 24-26). Then, Jesus simply claimed to do what his Father does (verse 37) and pointed once again to his miracles as the reason the Jews should believe him (verse 38). Their response was still unbelieving, and they tried to seize him, but he eluded their grasp (verse 39). No claim of divinity by Jesus is in view at all in this passage. What Jesus claimed was that, as the Messiah, he had a oneness of purpose with his Father (verses 34-37).

In the minds of many, the Lord's brief encounter with Thomas as recorded in John 20:24-30 seems to include a clear statement, on Thomas' part, of the Lord's simultaneous humanity and divinity, "My Lord and my God!" It should be noted that John is alone among the Gospel writers to state explicitly that the Lord was with God in the beginning and was Himself divine (John 1:1). John's record of Thomas' confession is consistent with John's purpose of explicitly identifying the Lord. The confession may be taken as implying the simultaneous humanity and divinity of the Lord if the reader is already committed to that idea, but it is just as natural to understand the confession as a dual statement of Jesus' lordship over creation as a man as well as his glorious preincarnate existence as God's equal from eternity, both of which are fundamental perspectives within the Gospel of John. It may even have been the case that Thomas' confession precipitated John's own realization of the divine preexistence of the Lord. John begins his Gospel with a pithy statement about the divinity of the Word who was with God "in the beginning" using language that alludes to the opening of the Book of Genesis. John also, at the end of the stunning revelation given to him as recorded in the Book of Revelation, presents Jesus' final words to him, "I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16, author's rendering). This is in essence what Thomas confessed much earlier, by the revelation that was given to him through the Holy Spirit when the Lord appeared to him after the resurrection. Indeed, it should be remembered that, before his crucifixion, Jesus gave his disciples detailed teaching about the Holy Spirit (John 14; 16).

Jesus calls the Spirit the “Advocate” (John 14:16; 16:7). He also calls Him “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 16:13) and says that the Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth (John 16:13). What we observe in Thomas’ confession after Jesus’ resurrection is the outworking of the Spirit’s revelatory work in the heart and mind of Thomas, because in the moments just prior to his confession, Thomas was refusing to believe that the Lord had been seen by the disciples (John 20:25). Suddenly, Thomas’ understanding of the Lord even exceeded that of the other disciples; he understood Jesus’ full identity as the divine Son from eternity. This new knowledge came by revelation through the Spirit, just as Jesus had promised the Spirit would do. Thomas saw the truth of Jesus’ preexistent divinity first, before any of the other disciples. What a stunning and unexpected reversal. Doubting Thomas was thus given, by the Spirit, the highest knowledge of the Lord’s identity that any of the apostles had up to that point in time, and the Lord clearly approved of Thomas’ confession. We observe this same level of knowledge in the Apostle John at a much later time when he wrote his Gospel (John 1:1; 1:14), and in the Apostle Paul when he wrote the Epistle to the Philippians (Philippians 2:6-11), but Doubting Thomas was the first to have this knowledge, by the Spirit.

Addendum

2 Peter 1:1 and Titus 2:13 are translated in many versions of the English Bible in a manner that emphasizes the deity of Jesus Christ. Theologians have justified the translation based on the Greek syntax of these verses, citing a Greek construction known as the Granville Sharp Rule.

The Rule says that if the definite article (in these verses, in the masculine/singular/genitive τοῦ) is present in association with a singular/personal/non-proper noun (here in the masculine/singular/genitive θεοῦ, translated “of our God” in 2 Peter 1:1 with the presence of the personal pronoun in the first-person/plural/genitive ἡμῶν), but is not repeated in association with a second singular/personal/non-proper noun in the same case (here in the masculine/singular/genitive σωτῆρος, translated “savior”), which follows after the copulative conjunction καὶ (translated “and”), then both nouns refer to the same person (in these verses, in the masculine/singular/genitive Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, translated “Jesus Christ”).

Two insurmountable problems are evident with the application of the Granville Sharp Rule to these verses. First, the translation of the verses using the Rule is not consistent with the straightforward meaning of the Christ Hymn as well as the straightforward meaning of the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1; 1:14). Second, the use of the definite article in association with the Greek word for “god” is a construction that is used consistently throughout the NT to show that it is God the Father who is being referenced. Because of the unique nature of this use of the definite article, it is evident that the Granville Sharp Rule does not apply to 2 Peter 1:1 or Titus 2:13. Two different persons are being referenced-- God (the Father) and our savior Jesus Christ.

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