

“Upon the Lampstand”

“After lighting a lamp there is not one person who conceals it with something or who puts it underneath a bed. Instead the person puts it upon a Lampstand so that those who come inside may see the light.”—*Jesus of Nazareth*, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke 8:16–17.

Question: *What is your understanding of Philippians 2:5–9, and why does the NWT read so differently from versions like the NASB? (February 10, 2008)*

Note: The following discussion of Philippians 2:5–9 is a revision of my December 15, 2007, “Upon the Lampstand” article, which was itself a revision of a my published discussion of this account in my *Three Dissertations on the Teachings of Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Murrieta, CA: Elihu Books, 2003), note 5, pages 213–216. A similar presentation of this material, as it relates to the real preexistence of the Messiah, can be found in Chapter 3 of my forthcoming *Jehovah’s Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, 3rd Edition (Murrieta, CA: Elihu Books, 2008).]

Answer: The translation and resulting meaning of Philippians 2:5–9 has troubled scholars and others for some time. This can be seen in part when you consider the many and varied translations of this section of Paul’s letter that have been offered over the past several centuries, and the resulting interpretations given by many readers of these translations. Yet, after examining the text and after considering various opinions about its meaning I find that there really is little over which to be troubled once we set aside all preconceived views about what the text *can* mean in the context of first century CE and earlier theology. That is to say, if we keep ourselves from bringing post-biblical theology to the text of Philippians 2:6–9 in order to understand it, then we can avoid a number of problems that often arise and persist, as the history of the discussion of this text shows. What we should first do is attempt to understand the grammatical possibilities of the text and then try to understand the meaning of the words used within the historical context of the NT, or even as they may relate to or involve literature composed during the times in which the Bible was written. Here is my brief attempt at both.

There are some technical, grammatical issues that have to be presented in getting to what I consider to be a correct understanding of this passage in its historical context. For example, I believe that what is called the “double-accusative” view is the best way to interpret this text, meaning that the Greek verb *hegeomai* (which here means “to consider”) has “being equal to/like God” (*to einai isa theoi*) as its direct object and the word “exploit” (*harpagmon*) is the predicate accusative. The predicate accusative (“exploit”) describes the direct object (“being equal to/like God”). The result of this view, together with my understanding of the text’s key terms (see below), is something along

the lines of ‘he ... did not consider [*hegeomai*] being equal to or like God [*to einai isa theoi*, direct object] as something to exploit [*harpagmon*, predicate accusative]). This means that the prehuman Christ, the “Word” (John 1:1), had some kind of equality or likeness with God that he did not think should be ‘exploited’ for his own benefit. Rather, as verse 7 tells us, he “emptied himself” by giving up his ‘equality’ or ‘likeness’ in ‘form’ (his heavenly appearance) with God and he chose instead to ‘take on a slave’s form,’ which means he was “found in the likeness of men” (compare John 1:14). The idea expressed here is that he gave up one form or type of existence for another form or type of existence, which exchange is expressed in simpler terms by Paul elsewhere in his writings, “... though he was rich he became poor” (2 Corinthians 8:9). He did not retain his ‘riches’ when he “became poor,” otherwise he was not really “poor.”

As indicated in the preceding paragraph, the Greek word *morphe* can mean ‘form’ as in one’s external appearance (“form,” “outward appearance,” and “shape” are the primary definitions given for *morphe* in *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., edited and revised by Frederick W. Danker [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000], page 659). But one’s external appearance often reveals the underlying nature. In other words, if one has a human appearance one is possibly, even likely, a human by nature. Of course, non–humans (spirits) can take on a human form even to the point of eating (Genesis 19:1–3), but in the case of the Word it is said that he ‘became flesh’ (John 1:14). Unlike the angels who merely took on human form and temporary function in the Old Testament, the Word was actually ‘conceived’ in a human womb (Luke 1:31), born as a child (Luke 2:7), and he grew up and “found himself” as a man (Philippians 2:7). This was a permanent change from one form to another, from an ‘emptying’ of an ‘equality/likeness to God’ to a ‘taking on’ of a ‘likeness with men.’

I believe there are good reasons for understanding the Greek word *isa* (“equality” or “likeness”) as indicating the kind of form or existence the prehuman Jesus gave up (“emptied”), namely, one that was ‘equal to or like God.’ The reason why I use “likeness” in association with “equality” here when it comes to explaining the Greek word *isa* as used in Philippians 2:6 is because *isa* can mean either “equality” or “likeness” (as in the LXX of Job 10:10; 11:12; 13:12, 28; 15:16; 24:20; 27:16; 28:2; 29:14; 30:19; 40:4; see also Wisdom 7:3; compare the use of *isa* in Lu 20:36, where it also means “like” in that those who die and are resurrected are “like” the angels in that they “neither marry nor are given in marriage” and also in that “neither can they die anymore”). Finally, I see no reason why *theou* (the genitive form of the Greek word for “God” or “god”) could not be viewed as indefinite (namely, “form of a *god*”). Usually it is post–biblical Trinitarian theology that argues against such a translation, but biblically since even Jesus shows that others whom God rejects can be called “gods” without contradicting the biblical faith of “one God, the Father” (John 10:30–36; 1 Corinthians 8:6), there should be little difficulty assimilating an indefinite sense for *theos* here with respect to the prehuman “form” Jesus owned. However, since Jesus is the “exact copy of God’s being” and the

“expression of his glory” (Hebrews 1:3), *theou* here could indeed refer to “God” himself whom Jesus was equal to or like in his heavenly appearance, again, just as we see articulated in Hebrews 1:3. But, again, there is no grammatical or semantic obstacle to translating *theou* here as “a god,” that is, so long as this is understood in the context of and ultimately consistent with NT theology as a whole, namely, that there is “one God, the Father” of whom Jesus is a “copy.”

Finally, we have the “difficult and rare word” *harpagmon* (Gerald F. Hawthorne, “In the Form of God and Equal with God,” in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, Ralph P. Martin and Brian J. Dodd, eds. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998], page 102). Rather than comment on the meaning of this word extendedly, which has proven to be quite a challenge as one can glean from Hawthorne’s words, I think we can narrow down its likely meaning by recognizing that “form of God/divine form” (*morphe theou*) is what is meant by “the being equal with God” (*to einai isa theoi*). As Hawthorne explains:

The definite article *to* of *to einai* confirms that this second expression is closely connected with the first, for the function of the definite article here is designated to point back to something previously mentioned. Therefore one should expect that [*to einai isa theoi* (“the being equal with God”)] would refer epexegetically [explanatory] to the [*en morphe theou huparchon* (“existing in the form of God”)] that preceded it. This means then that “the being equal with God” is precisely another way of saying “in the form of God.” Or better still, whatever meaning one might put forth as a possible meaning for the expression [“in the form of God”] can only be properly understood in terms of [“equal to/like God”], and vice versa—[“the being equal to God”] can only be properly understood in terms of [“in the form of God/divine form”]. [Hawthorne, “In the Form of God and Equal with God,” page 104.]

With this in mind, it seems reasonably clear that Christ already possessed an equality with God by existing in the same “form” as God. So it is not a question of a “seizure” (NWT). The real question is did the prehuman Jesus refuse to “cling” to the equality that he already had? Or is the sense of *harpagmon* more along the lines of “exploit,” meaning the prehuman Jesus did not “exploit” what was his already, which he could have done by refusing to be the one to ‘descend from heaven’ (John 3:13)? Such an ‘exploitation’ of his equality with God would have in effect meant that he chose to “cling” to what he already had, again, with the intent of ‘exploiting’ it for his own personal gain. I believe, therefore, that the meaning of *harpagmon* becomes secondary to the understanding that “form of God/divine form” is the same thing as “the being equal with God,” for once this is understood then we know that Jesus already had that which is further described by *harpagmon*, namely, as something he did ‘not cling to’ or ‘exploit.’ This brings us to the use of the verb *hegeomai* (“consider”) and the question of how we should understand it in relation to this word *harpagmon*.

The syntactical question of Philippians 2:6 hinges on whether we have here an idiomatic use of *hegeomai* (again, a verb which in this instance means to “think” or “consider”). By

“idiomatic use” I mean a usage that conforms to what we find elsewhere regarding a particular use of *hegeomai* where it is used with a double accusative, as in this text. More specifically, the question here has to do with the meaning of *hegeomai* where one articulated (with the Greek article) accusative follows it and where one anarthrous (without the Greek article) accusative precedes it. Where we have such a double accusative construction used with *hegeomai* it appears that the accusative following the verb (*hegeomai*) always serves as the direct object of the verb and the accusative preceding *hegeomai* serves as the predicate accusative which, again, means that it describes the direct object.

Roy W. Hoover, “The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971), pages 102–103, is the leading proponent of just such a view, and in support of his claim he refers to several similar texts. For example, Isidore of Pelusium (fourth century CE) writes, *Ei hermaion hegesato to einai ison* (“If he considered being equal a treasure”). Here we have *hegeomai* used with a double accusative, where the articulated accusative following the verb (*to einai ison*) is the direct object and the anarthrous accusative preceding *hegeomai* is the predicate accusative that further describes “being equal” as “a treasure.” Another example of this construction is found in Diodorus Siculus (*Library* 15.4.3), “On arriving in Egypt he met the king and urged him to continue the war energetically and to consider the war against the Persians a common undertaking” (Greek: *koinon hegeisthai ton pros tous Persas polemon*). Here we have *hegeomai* followed by an articulated accusative *ton pros tous persas polemon* (“the war against the Persians”) serving as the direct object, with the anarthrous *koinon* (meaning, “common undertaking”) preceding *hegeomai* as the predicate accusative. Also, in the *Letter of Aristeeas* 292.2 we find the same grammatical construction. R.J.H. Shutt translates this text as, “you consider injustice the greatest evil” (found in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, James H. Charlesworth, ed. [New York: Doubleday, 1985], page 32). Here we have the same pattern of anarthrous predicate accusative (“greatest evil,” *megiston kakon*), verb (“consider,” *hegeomai*), and articulated accusative object (“injustice,” *ten adikian*). Still another instance of this idiom can be found in Josephus’ *War of the Jews*, 2.581, where he writes, “to consider the harm of your friends as your own.” Here the anarthrous predicate accusative *oikeion* (“one’s own”) again precedes *hegeomai* (“to consider”), and *hegeomai* is also again followed by an articulated accusative object *ten blaben* (“the harm”).

Therefore, it seems to me that the anarthrous accusative–*hegeomai*–articulated accusative construction always conforms to the previously described usage, namely, predicate accusative–*hegeomai*–direct object accusative. However, recently Jason David BeDuhn (*Truth In Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament* [Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003]), has questioned Hoover’s analysis and written in support of the NWT translation. On page 55 of his book BeDuhn refers to different words related to the Greek verb *harpazo*, one of which is *harpagmon*. BeDuhn then concludes, “You can see that every one of these related words has to do

with the seizure of something not yet one's own." But the difference in Philippians 2:6 is that we have *harpagmon* used in a syntactical relationship with *hegeomai* where the syntactical idiom in question suggests that *harpagmon* is describing something that the prehuman Jesus *already possessed*, namely, an "equality/likeness with God." BeDuhn challenges Hoover's claims, not by presenting examples an anarthrous accusative-*hegeomai*-articular accusative construction that do not follow the pattern of predicate accusative-*hegeomai*-direct object accusative, but by referring to an article by J.C. O'Neil ("Hoover on *Harpagmos* Reviewed, with a Modest Proposal Concerning Philippians 2:6," *HTR* 81 [1988], pages 445-449) and then concluding, "Hoover's entire argument was demolished in just four pages." But this simply is not true where it concerns the syntactical idiom described in above involving *hegeomai* and two accusatives.

Indeed, not only have O'Neil's arguments "not generally persuaded critics" (Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005], page 94, note 15), but O'Neil actually argues that the text of Philippians really read something that it does not read in nor is it suggested by any known NT manuscript. O'Neil ("Hoover on *Harpagmos* Reviewed," page 449) argues that Paul actually used a second negative (Greek: *me*) and that later scribes replaced it with the Greek article *to* ("the") so that what Paul really wrote (according to O'Neil) is, "who being in the form of God thought it not robbery not to be equal [*me eina*] with God"! O'Neil has done nothing to 'demolish' the double accusative view presented by Hoover where *hegeomai* is concerned. Ironically, O'Neil's article was written in "honor of Professor C.F.D. Moule on his eightieth birthday" ("Hoover on *Harpagmos* Reviewed," page 445). Yet, according to Hawthorne, Moule (who has written extensively on Philippians 2:5-9) "graciously bowed to Hoover and admitted that Hoover's philological study had won the day and in his (Moule's) judgment was the final answer to the enigmatic [*harpagmos*]" (Hawthorne, "In the Form of God and Equal With God," page 102).

With the syntactical question now reasonably settled by good reasons, let me return for a moment to a discussion of several key terms found in these passages. I have already briefly considered the meaning of the word *morphe*, namely, that it can mean "exterior form" and I noted that this "form" may or may not reflect the underlying nature of the person or thing in question. Further on this point, compare Mark 16:12 (longer ending) where *morphe* clearly does not reflect the person's underlying nature since here Jesus had already been raised to life as a "spirit" being (1 Corinthians 15:45) and he is here only appearing to his disciples in a human form similar to how angels appeared in human form (but were not humans by their nature) and ate with Lot in Genesis 19:1-3 (compare Luke 24:43). But in the case of Philippians 2:6 there does not appear to be any reason to disconnect the divine form of the prehuman Jesus from a divine nature, since the 'form of God/a god' in this text was not a form that Jesus assumed after owning some other "form." Apparently the first form mentioned in this text is his original form, the one in which he was created by God as his 'firstborn image' (Colossians 1:15). Jesus' original prehuman "form" was 'equal to or like God' apparently in that they were both

divine spirits with one having been ‘copied’ into existence by the other as his only-begotten Son, “He [the Son] is the reflection of [God’s] glory and the imprint of [God’s] being.”—Hebrews 1:3; John 1:14, 18.

With the above in mind, I offer the following translation of Philippians 2:5–9:

Your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ’s, who even though he was existing in the form of God/a god [or ‘a divine form’] he did not consider this equality with [or, ‘this likeness to’] God as something to exploit. Instead he gave himself up and took on the appearance of a slave and came to be the same as men. When he found out that he was in the same form as men he lowered himself even further by becoming obedient until death, indeed, death by torture.

I believe such a translation is in keeping with the most well-founded syntactical explanation and it is also in complete harmony with the biblical sense of the terms used, in particular *morphe* (“form”), *theos* (“a god”) and *isa* (“equal” or “like”). How, though, does my proposed translation and understanding compare to what we read in the NWT and in the NASB? Let us consider all three translations of Philippians 2:6–7 [with all bracketed words added by me]:

NWT (1984): ... who, although he [Jesus] was existing in God’s form, gave no consideration to a seizure, namely, that he should be equal to God. No, but he emptied himself and took a slave’s form and came to be in the likeness of men.

NASB (1977): ... who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God [as] a thing to be grasped, but he emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men.

Stafford: ... who even though he was existing in the form of God/a god [or ‘a divine form’] he did not consider this equality with [or, ‘this likeness to’] God as something to exploit. Instead he gave himself up and took on the appearance of a slave and came to be in the same form as men.

As far as translations go, mine is more in line with the NASB in that we both accept the following grammatical relationship: *harpagmon* (predicate accusative) *hegesato* (verb) *to einai isa theoi* (accusative direct object). NWT takes the following view: *harpagmon* (“a seizure,” accusative direct object) *hegesato* (“consideration,” verb) *to einai isa theoi* (“namely, that he should be equal to God,” appositional [further defines something already mentioned (“seizure”)] accusative). I agree with NASB’s understanding of the syntactical relationships, but we appear to differ in terms of how this text should be understood, with NASB suggesting that the prehuman Jesus did not “regard equality with God [as] a thing to be grasped,” which could mean he did not have it or that he did not hold onto it, while I believe that the prehuman Jesus clearly did *have* an equality or likeness with God prior to ‘emptying himself’ of it (= “the form of God/a god”). NWT suggests that Jesus simply never gave “consideration” to any “seizure” of “equality with God,” which means NWT does not here see Jesus as having the kind of “equality” with

God of which Paul speaks (again, “form of God/a god”). But the understanding that Christ gave up his divine form/nature and took on the form/nature of a human is present in my translation and in NWT’s translation, whereas NASB appears to understand things differently, in that it interprets “emptied Himself” in verse 7 as meaning that Jesus simply “laid aside His privileges” (see note “3” to “emptied” in NASB). Yet, nowhere does the text say anything about Jesus’ “privileges.” This is simply a Trinitarian way of getting out of the text’s linking of Jesus’ prehuman *morphe* in verse 6 with the verb *keno’o* (“emptied”) in verse 7, which ‘emptying’ is made clear by his taking on a form that is not *einai isa theoi* (“equal to/like God”), namely, *morphen doulou* (“a form of a slave”), *homoiomati anthropon* (“an image/appearance of men”), and *schemati ... hos anthropos* (“a shape/form of man”).

If my suggested translation and understanding of this passage is correct, then in giving up his equality/likeness with God Christ showed the highest level of humility and obedience (worship) that is possible for one to show, which humility and obedience is the very reason for Paul’s bringing up this account of Jesus’ prehuman activities in the first place (Philippians 2:5). While grammatically I think NWT’s translation does not have the best reasons supporting it, one way to understand its translation consistently with what the Bible teaches is to compare NWT’s translation and the resulting meaning with what happened in the Genesis account involving Adam and Eve. They were also made in God’s likeness in one sense (Genesis 1:26), but they did not resist the urge to reach out and become equal with or like God (Genesis 3:5–6). However, I believe based on the good grammatical and other reasons given above that in Philippians 2:5–9 we have Paul asserting Christ’s prehuman ownership of an equality with God that he did not exploit for his own gain, an equality or similarity that he is elsewhere expressly said to have possessed (Hebrews 1:3). This is clear from the fact that Christ existed in the “form of God/a god” which is apparently the same thing as “this equality with God” mentioned in the same verse (6). Paul uses this example of Jesus’ humility and obedience to God to show us how we should think, as Christians, so that like Christ may be exalted by God through our obedience to him “until death.”—Philippians 2:9–11; Revelation 2:26–28; 3:21.

For additional discussion and a defense of the NWT reading of Philippians 2:6, see Rolf Furuli, *The Role of Theology and Bias in Bible Translation: With a special look at the New World Translation of Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Huntington Beach, CA: Elihu Books, 1999), pages 262–275. However, Furuli’s comparison of the syntax of Philippians 2:6 with 3 Maccabees 3:15 (pages 270–271) and Job 35:2 and Baruch 5:9 (page 270, note 152) suffers from the fact that none of these texts have an articulated accusative following *hegeomai*. Indeed, in 3 Maccabees 3:15 the accusative *ta katoikounta* (“the inhabitants”) is the object of the infinitive verb *tithenesasthai* (“to nurse”), which makes this text very different from Philippians 2:6. The sense of *hegeomai* in Baruch 5:9 may also be “lead,” “guide” (“For God will lead Israel with joy ...”), and in Job 35:2 there is, again, no articulated accusative following *hegeomai*. Therefore, I do not accept his arguments in

favor of the NWT rendering of this text. The double accusative view articulated by Hoover has better reasons supporting it.

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